

Chapter 1

1976

A telephone rang out across the air-conditioned room. It seemed louder, like an alarm, and carried the same urgency.

In the bathroom Dave Smith heard the call but continued to look into the mirror. He placed his razor on the basin ledge and picked up a freshly laundered towel. Slowly, while the ringing persisted, he rubbed away excess shaving cream that clung to his ears and neck. For a moment longer he studied his expression and saw the first sign of annoyance as it drew a veil across his eyes. He threw the towel aside, opened the bathroom door and moved across a grey tufted Axminster into the lounge. It was a huge room dominated by glass; floor to ceiling windows comprising an entire wall looked out across the city skyline. He stood at the window and as he lifted the receiver he gazed impassively at the familiar landmarks.

“Yes?”

“David?” A woman’s voice triggered a vague memory.

“Hello?” In the background he could make out Creedence Clearwater Revival and *Bad Moon Rising*.

He said, “I’m here.”

“Do you recognize me?”

“I’ll never forget that Connecticut heavy breathing. It’s been a long time.”

“Eleven years.”

“That long?”

“You made a lasting impression,” she said and laughed, a clotted laugh that focused his memory so that her image came flooding back.

The hairs on his arms prickled. He saw his narrowed eyes in the glass. For a second his reflection surprised him. Without his clothes he seemed taller and younger.

“Where’s Tony?” he asked. “Are you still with him?”

“Unfortunately I am.” A pause seemed to go on forever before she said, “We’re over here for some shopping. At least, that’s what he says. But you can guarantee that it’s business. Nothing happens around Tony that isn’t business.”

Dave nodded into the handset.

“I’ve got to see you, Dave,” she went on, breathlessly now. Edginess had crept in. “Can you make it?”

“When?”

“Right now. This minute. You know how it is? You’ve got to make the most of it. I can’t be sure of getting another chance. He’s out for the entire day. I’m supposed to be shopping.”

There was silence for a moment, even the Revival had packed it in.

He said, “You still there?”

Eventually she came back on, her voice strangely distant: “I’ve thought about you. It’s never happened with anyone else.”

“Where?”

“Same place, for old times’ sake... He’s taken everyone with him. I’m here on my own.”

“It’s bloody dangerous, Sharon. Can’t you get out?”

“He might have someone tailing me, Dave. You know what he’s like. They could be waiting in the lobby. But you could get in. Nobody would know you’re coming up here.”

“Give me half an hour.”

Dave dropped the handset on to its cradle and for a moment remained motionless, wondering if he’d made a mistake.

The late morning August sun burst through the cloud and bounced off the distant river and as the concrete shimmered and the glass exploded the city became a different place.

Twelve years earlier Sharon Zinn had appeared naked in *Playboy*. She was seventeen. Later that year she married an American gangster, Tony Valenti. He was a member of the New York Mafioso and she married him for his power and for his money. He was a small wiry man of forty. She was a beautiful blonde, and even without stilettos she still towered over him by a good four inches. Love had not been involved but he was happy and he liked to show her off. He would not allow the resumption of her modelling career. The elevated heels he took to wearing were, in the eyes of the Long Island dons, the sign of a flawed character.

In April of 1965 Tony Valenti accompanied Angelo Bruno on a trip to London. He brought Sharon along as an accessory. He saw her as a status symbol and enjoyed the envy – perhaps even jealousy – he detected in the faces of his associates. They stayed at the Park Lane Hilton. Bruno had come over to meet the Krays to discuss some hot Canadian securities he wanted to

offload in Europe. He was also keen to expand his involvement in the Mayfair clubs and, at the time, he thought that the Krays might be ideally situated to handle his interests. That was not important. What was relevant was that Sharon noticed the eighteen-year-old Dave Smith in one of the Hilton bars and she couldn't take her eyes off him.

Even though his father had told Dave to give the Krays and their nancy boys a wide berth – for some time he'd been concerned that the twins were gathering some powerful friends in Whitehall and the media, and even the Old Bill seemed to be looking the other way – Dave was drawn to the glamour and razzmatazz that surrounded them. Celebrities from both the UK and America, along with the customary photographers from the Sunday papers, were never far away. It was in the bar that Reggie Kray introduced Dave to Angelo Bruno and his entourage and, when the others retired to a quiet corner to discuss business, Valenti had no hesitation in asking Dave to keep his wife company and to escort her, when she'd had enough, to their room. “She was a *Playboy* centrefold,” he boasted. “And a movie star. If you ask her real nicely, kid, she'll give you her autograph.”

She was perched on a bar stool, toying with the stem of her drink. She watched his approach through the mirror behind the bar. “Did my clothes just disappear, or did you take them off one at a time?”

Her eyes flashed in the mirror and the beginnings of a smile tugged at her lips.

He laughed out loud.

“Was it that obvious?”

“I hope no one else noticed. Tony's kind of funny about things like that.”

“He doesn't strike me as funny at all.”

She lifted her drink.

“You're bored?”

“You could say.”

“How can anyone be bored in London?”

“It's like a strait-jacket,” she said. “Being married to these guys is worse than marrying into your Royal Family. You can't make a move without them knowing!”

“That bad?”

“You can believe it.”

“Tony told me about the films.”

“The movies? He tells everybody about them. They were the beach movies, surf rolling in and girls busting out of bikinis in every other frame and no one over twenty on the beach, except for Frankie Avalon, that is. At a push he was old enough to be our daddy. I was the one playing volleyball. I was the one in the blue bikini. It matched my eyes. *Beach Party* and *Bikini Beach* – did you see them?”

Dave shook his head and said slowly, “I’ll watch out for them. If necessary, I’ll get the family to buy the local Odeon.”

“Keep going. You’re pushing all the right buttons.”

He gave her a long studied look.

She smiled and flipped open a red pack of du Maurier. Her gold lighter flashed.

“I’m getting a taste for your English cigarettes. Do you want one?”

He caught a whiff of petrol and said, “I don’t use them.”

She blew him a jet of smoke and lifted her eyebrows and said matter-of-factly, “What now?”

“Was there a casting couch?”

“Hell, in Hollywood you have to screw security just to get on the lot.”

Dave smiled and glanced in the bar mirror. The far table was animated. Knowing Ronnie, the meeting would last well into the small hours.

“Drink up,” he said. “I’ll take you home.”

“Your place or mine?”

With scant regard for their safety it began in the lift, continued in the corridor and climaxed on the floor of Valenti’s suite. He left her there, on the carpet, with the hem of her evening gown wrapped around her waist and the only underwear she’d been wearing hooked around one ankle. She smiled at him and said, “You English are kind of friendly. Whatever happened to that reserve we hear so much about?”

Eleven years later Dave remembered it all. As he motored across to see her again he was stirred by the memory of their first meeting.

He left the car at the service entrance and slipped a uniformed guy on the door a tenner.

The man tapped his cap and said, “It’ll be in the usual place, Mr Smith.”

It was check out time and the reception area was busy. It suited him. The more faces on the ground the less likely he was of being recognized. He took the lift to the twelfth then used the stairs to Valenti's suite. The corridor with its deep spotless carpet was empty.

The years had done nothing to change her. Even now she could have stepped right out of the centrefold and still wouldn't need the touch-up artist. She stood framed by the doorway, her blond hair cascading over her shoulders and flaring in the light that piled into the room behind her.

"What kept you?" she said. "You're thirty seconds late." Her eyes flashed just as he remembered and her mouth widened into a wicked smile.

"I forgot how many stairs there were."

She waved him inside. Her skimpy, ivory-coloured slip rippled and clung to every curve.

"You're looking good."

"So are you," he said.

"Come on, let's not waste time. We've only got about eight hours. They won't be back until eight."

"Don't you want to be courted?"

"Just come here and make love to me. I've been waiting eleven years for this."

He closed the door and pinned her against it. Her lips were hot. Her tongue fluttered against his.

"Jesus!" she said when he pulled away and she gulped in air.

He picked her up and carried her toward a leather sofa. Half way across the deep pile he paused to kick off his shoes. He set her down as though she weighed nothing and sank beside her. His hands worked beneath the silk. He pulled down her underwear and raised her slip, for a moment savouring her thighs. She rubbed her legs together, moving her blond hair. It was a novelty. It hid nothing. He used his mouth and heard her tiny catch of breath.

Suddenly she was pulling his hair, digging her fingernails into his shoulders. Her body coiled, her grip became almost unbearable until, slowly, she relaxed and he heard her sigh as she released a long breath. He looked up and smiled. His lips were wet and sparkling. A thread of something, spittle or her, wavered between his mouth and her crotch and glistened in the light that streamed in over Hyde Park.

"Take your gear off," she said. "I want you to abuse me. Be rough!"

"I think I can manage that," he said as he struggled out of his clothes. She caught hold of him.

“Jesus, I remember you,” she said. “It’s like meeting an old friend.”

“How long are you over here?”

“We fly back tomorrow. We live in Miami now.”

“We’ll have to make the most of today, then.”

“That’s what I was counting on.”

He nestled between her legs and brought up her slip to bare her breasts and the years were stripped away. It was all so familiar, the tiny nipples, the soft curves rising to them. That shadowy idea, perhaps the thought of domination, thrilled him. He felt the end of her and every time he slammed in he heard her gasp and every time she gasped his smile of satisfaction widened a little more.

In those quickening moments before he let go she squealed and clamped her legs tightly around him.

She laughed, “God, this is bliss. I’ve waited years.”

He cradled her head against his shoulder. She felt damp against him.

“You know,” she said, “apart from when I’ve been on my own that’s the first time I’ve come since...”

He turned to her. “You’re joking?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s been eleven years.”

“Fuck me! That’s diabolical. Why don’t you buy him a book?”

“It’s not the technique, Dave. It’s how I feel.”

“Are you telling me there’s been no one else in all this time?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Yes, you could say.”

“You don’t know how it is. Over here he feels safe. I get some freedom. In Miami when I go downtown I get to be escorted by two of his gorillas. Sometimes I think I’m suffocating, you know what I mean?”

“Why don’t you leave him?”

She snorted. “You marry these guys for life, you know that. Where would I go? Where could I hide?”

Dave nodded, understanding even more than she knew.

“So this is it, eh?”

“Till the next time,” she said. She reached up and stroked his cheek. “I love you, Dave. I know it’s crazy. I know we barely know each other. But thinking of you has kept me sane all these years. Now you’ve filled my tank again I can go on a while longer.” She sighed and pressed closer. Her left breast flattened against his chest. Her right nipple brushed against him and tickled. “Did you think of me in all that time?”

“Course I did,” he said honestly. “I study that *Playboy* spread every night.”

“I’ve got older since then.”

“Not so I notice. I just wish the snaps had been taken now instead of then.”

“Why?”

“They’d be more explicit now. Split fig, pictures on horseback.”

She nudged him. “I think I know what you mean. Is that Cockney?”

“No, Sweetheart. It’s Anglo Saxon.”

Her laugh was smoky, as he remembered.

“If ever he dies,” she said, “and if wishing has anything to do with it, he will. I mean, Jesus, he smokes three packs a day and gets through a bottle of JD before noon. But if he did die could I look you up?” She turned to face him. “I mean would you want me to?”

He nodded meekly. “Course I would. Blimey, I can’t think of anything I’d like better.”

She settled down again.

“That’s what I thought,” she said.

It was late afternoon when he finally made a move. She watched him dress then threw on her slip and followed him to the door.

“Let’s not leave it so long next time,” he said.

“I’ll dream about you, David Smith.”

His smile was hesitant. He nodded and opened the door. She held him back and draped herself against him. Dave half turned as he heard a shuffle behind him.

Tony Valenti stood in the doorway, his wiry Italian features darkening by the moment.

“What the fuck is this?” His voice was high pitched. It filled the room like a siren. As if dazed by what he saw he took two steps backward.

Sharon dropped her hands from Dave’s neck and followed Valenti into the corridor. “It’s not what you think, Tony,” she said feebly.

“What the fuck am I thinking? Eh?” He pulled the strap of her slip. It snapped. She held on to the front to cover her breasts. He hit her hard, in the mouth. A fine spray of blood dotted the wall. Dave watched her go down and heard the thud as she hit the carpet.

Valenti shook, his wild eyes fixed on Dave. “I know you. Don’t I know you?” He pointed at Sharon. “That’s my fucking wife!” he yelled. “That whore’s my fucking wife!”

Dave shrugged and moved past him.

“Where the fuck are you going you motherfucking son of a bitch?”

Valenti was a tiny man; his threats toward Dave were absurd. He kicked out. His chiselled toecap landed heavily into Sharon’s stomach. She rolled over and slammed into the wall.

Dave turned back to face him. “Leave her alone,” he said.

Valenti let out a strangled cry and head lowered he charged at Dave. Dave hit him once. His fist caught the little man squarely in the face. His heavy signet ring caught the flesh and ripped away the side of Valenti’s big nose. Valenti staggered backward, clutching at his face. Blood streamed from between his fingers. He began to scream. Doors along the corridor opened and people peered out.

Valenti rushed again. The pain had dulled his brain. His hands still covered his face as he tried to butt Dave with the top of his head. Dave caught him again, hard, in the middle of the chest, and Valenti collapsed in a heap over Sharon’s feet.

At the end of the corridor two men fought their way through the crowd. Dave looked up as he heard their approach. They were both all-American boys, built like Dallas Cowboys complete with shoulder pads. They charged toward him. There were twenty yards between them as Dave made the corner to the stairs. He went down four at a time, crashing against the corners. He covered three flights before pausing to listen. Nothing. He decided they’d stayed to help the little wop. Taking his time now, dusting himself down and straightening his clothes as he went, he made his way to the lifts and five minutes later he was in the car park. He found his car under a No Parking sign and an arrow pointing the way to the 007 Night Spot, the International Restaurant and The London Tavern. Apart from The Tower, it was the only place in town.

He was woken just after one-thirty by a loud knock on his door. Jimmy Jones stood in the corridor. He was one of his father's key men. He looked worried, his bright eyes unusually severe.

"I've been ringing," he said irritably.

"Pulled the phone out."

"And banging on the door for the last ten minutes."

"I was on the lash," Dave offered.

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, I can smell it and I can see it in your eyes. Any redder and they'll be bleeding." His dark features mellowed. "You look like shit. Your liver needs a rest and then some."

"So what's with the panic?"

"Your old man's been going spare trying to get you."

Dave shrugged and glanced at his watch. "What's happened?"

"I thought you'd tell me."

Dave knew, or thought he did, and his gut tightened. He said, "There was a bit of bother earlier, at the Hilton."

"What sort of bother?"

"You know what these wops are like. They can't control their women."

Jimmy Jones grinned, "Is that all? And there I was thinking it was serious." His face dropped again. "Anyway, your old man's phone has been red hot for the last two hours. It's got to be something pretty important to keep him out of bed at this hour. By the time he spoke to me he was close to losing it."

Dave nodded gloomily. He didn't relish the prospect of facing his father, especially since his head was still reeling from the assault of half a litre of vodka. Although Dave enjoyed a position of authority – he took care of the family's collection business, controlled the foot soldiers, and was responsible for the franchises that allowed minor gangs the privilege of using the Smiths' name – he was still kept on his father's very short leash.

"I'll throw some clothes on. You better drive me over there."

Jimmy smiled quickly, without humour, and sat down to wait.

His father was a big man. His white hair was ruffled and the collar of his pyjama top ridged above a worn dressing gown. He sat in his favourite armchair, his legs crossed, his foot tapping so that his slipper slapped against his heel. The expanse of plain blue pyjama bottoms that Dave could see seemed somehow old-fashioned. His father looked drawn, and older. "You've caused me a lot of grief, boy. When are you going to learn?"

How old are you? Twenty-nine? Thirty? Then why is it you still act like an adolescent? When are you going to grow up and start acting like you're my eldest son instead of some fucking caveman?"

"Are you going to tell me what I've done, Pop? It's too early in the morning to guess."

"You've messed with the Mafia, boy, that's what. And half their fucking armed forces are on the way over here!"

Dave pulled a face as if he had tasted something nasty. Explanations were unnecessary. What worried him more than Valenti was that he didn't know how to handle his father who had little time for impropriety, even less time for indiscretion. He shrugged and filled a glass with vodka.

"Pop, it's my fault. He started slapping her about and I lost it."

"What did you expect him to do? He brings his wife over here for a little shopping to buy presents for their celebrations and some local piss artist gets his leg over. For God's sake, aren't there enough local girls? His wife! What's happened to respect and decency?"

"Blimey, Pop, if you'd have seen her. *Playboy* centrespread."

His father scowled and Dave knew at once that his excuse had simply compounded his earlier transgression.

"They're flying him home. An ambulance job for Christ's sake! Two broken ribs, and half his nose still in Park Lane!"

Dave swallowed half his drink.

"But worse than that, boy, you know what the worse thing is?"

Dave remained tight-lipped.

"You left her to face the music. You ran out on your *Girl of the Month*. How could a son of mine do that? Tell me?"

"Pop, he had two gorillas with him. There wasn't any return in me staying."

His father nodded sadly and Dave felt a sudden stab of embarrassment. The accusation of cowardice went right to the core. It would have been difficult to find a more serious indictment. The shame of it dried his throat and he finished his drink.

His father sighed and said, “Well, for your information, he’s half killed her. She’ll be in the hospital longer than the wop. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“I’m not. If I could do it over things would be different.” His father nodded reflectively.

“Meanwhile,” Dave said. “I better get some muscle together.”

“You’ll do nothing!” his father snapped. “Do you hear me? Nothing! You’ll make yourself scarce, and I mean scarce, like invisible, until I tell you otherwise. Your transport is outside. Get your bag packed and your shaving gear together. I want you out of the Smoke in the next hour.”

“Where?”

“You’ll find out. It won’t be a holiday. When I’ve sorted things out I’ll let you know.”

“Pop! How long?”

“As long as it takes, boy. I don’t know what I’m going to tell your mother. Pour me a whisky.” Dave filled another glass and carried it to his father. “Treat it as a lesson. Learn something. Now remember, you’re going to a good friend of mine. Do exactly what he tells you. Keep your mouth shut and your head down. I’ll see you when it’s all over.”

Chapter 2

Dave Smith was driven north and arrived at his destination just as a late, overcast dawn dribbled its grey watery colours from a bank of low cloud. His mood was darkened by the prospect of enforced idleness and when he saw what was to be his home for an indefinite period it turned darker and he silently cursed every American he could think of. Dave knew the city, the lights, the smells, the incessant sounds of life itself, and already he felt isolated.

During the journey he had considered his options and he felt certain his father was making a mistake. His best bet was to fight on ground that he knew with people that he trusted. It was not his way to run. He would have handled the jewel-studded Guineas in their Brioni suits and custom-made silk shirts with his own men and given them a permanent piece of dockland. That’s what they always wanted anyway. His father’s decision, which was bound to lose him some credibility, came as a surprise and, to his knowledge it was the first time the Smiths had backed away. Perhaps his father was losing touch. Perhaps the last few years of relative peace had blunted his cutting edge. Respect was the key to survival, and respect came from strength and

fear, not from running and hiding. The thought of cowardice stung him again. Who was it that said *Cowards die many times before their deaths?* Julius Caesar? Shakespeare?

Through the tinted rear windows he saw a small village, not much more than a single road lined with old cottages and one or two newer bungalows. It was just beginning to stir. One or two people moved to their cars and a paperboy was making his rounds. The road forked in one place into a tiny cobblestone market triangle and beyond that, before the roads joined again, grass footpaths widened to a village green. Everything dripped.

A strange mix of sensations churned his stomach; tiredness was there, burning into his eyes, but he felt as a refugee might, or a displaced person, as though everything he had known had been brought to an abrupt end.

Throughout the journey the driver, his father's personal driver, had remained curiously uncommunicative, almost as if he'd been instructed to keep his mouth shut. He'd been polite but his answers to Dave's probing had been to the point and conversation was non-existent. Dave was left in no doubt that for the time being his links with the family were well and truly broken.

From the village the road swung to the coast and ran parallel with the beach. The air drifting in from the North Sea was damp and pungent; a watery sun glared through the grey and lined the water's edge with dirty yellow froth. The narrow B road curled away inland and now the light shafted through the trees. A small miserable-looking cottage with a poorly maintained thatched roof and weathered timbers stood only twenty paces from the road and with a thick hedgerow concealing its path until the last moment the driver overshot and had to reverse. To the left of the drive, beyond a group of derelict sheds, a carpet of windfalls lay beneath the trees and a couple of longhaired pigs grunted around them.

Dave remained seated, motionless and stony-faced. The driver climbed out and took a suitcase from the boot. He carried it to the front door then returned and opened the rear door of the car.

"This is it, Dave. I suppose you'll get used to the smell."

Dave studied the man for a moment searching for a hint of emotion. There was none. Eventually he nodded, resigned to his fate, and climbed out.

"See you later. Take care." For the first time there was a kindness in the man's voice.

"Fuck you, son!" Dave said.

The driver offered him a cautious shrug, climbed quickly into the car and turned the ignition. Dave watched the car back out until it disappeared from view behind the thick hedgerow.

The rusty hinges of the paint-blistered front door squealed into the silence as he pushed it open.

Dave dropped his case at the door. It was even worse than he'd imagined. A small square parlour was musty and damp. It was all but inaccessible because of a huge oak table that left just a couple of feet of space around its sides.

He climbed some narrow, dangerously worn stairs that led from the one small room to a small bedroom with its ceiling slanting with the roof. A three-quarter sized bed was made up and a dresser had been polished. He found a bathroom and caught sight of his haggard looks in a mirror. He was still scowling as he made his way back down the creaking stairs.

The kitchen equipment was meagre: a porcelain sink with an unfinished work surface and a grease-filled crack along the wall, an antiquated gas cooker with a loose door and rings, a small refrigerator with just enough room inside for milk, bacon and butter, an old cast-iron stove with a store of logs beside it and an enamelled kettle on top. From the stove's open door wood ash had fallen from the grating on to a raised concrete bed. A larder was filled with groceries and cleaning utensils. Dave smiled cynically. He was going to lose weight. He couldn't remember the last time he'd prepared a meal.

The murky light in the room filtered in through casement windows and was just sufficient for him to find his way around. He found a tea caddy and teaspoon, and some mugs hanging on hooks in the larder. He made some tea but could manage only a mouthful before creeping back up to the bedroom. He fell asleep thinking that his exploration of the warm, secretive areas of the woman from *Bikini Beach* had not been worth it.

He was woken by noises from below. He negotiated the stairs and found a heavy-set man holding a boiling kettle above the teapot. He was red-faced with wide muddy eyes and a nose criss-crossed with map-like formations of purple lines. His hair was short and peppered with grey. Broad shoulders thrust forward, thick eyebrows raised and the face broke into a rugged smile.

"I'm Joe Daley. You look like shit!" His shoulders relaxed. His eyes remained curious. "Dave?"

Dave nodded and accepted a mug of rich tea. He noticed a .410 leaning against the wall.

"Well, remember the name, Daley. You're my nephew visiting. My place is two hundred yards up the road. I've been told to keep an eye on you, so I'll do that. I'll be down from time to time to see to the pigs. Just remember, a London accent is a dead giveaway up here so keep away from the locals."

Dave gulped at his tea. It tasted better than his earlier effort.

"You need to run the water before you use it. It tends to lie in the pipes," Daley said as if reading his mind. "Someone will come in from time to time to clean up and change the towels. If you need anything special that's the time to ask. You won't see much of me but I'll be around, watching. If you keep your head down we don't expect any trouble. We country folk like the peace and quiet."

“This is Cuddy Hughes’ manor. Do you work for him?”

“That isn’t your business. There are books and there’s the telly. If you want to walk out, get some air, that’s OK. But you walk away from company, right?”

“It’s your show, my son.” Dave shrugged.

“I’m not your son,” Daley said sternly. “I’m your uncle.” He finished his tea, picked up his shotgun and moved heavily to the door. “I’ll leave you to do the dishes. See you around.” He had to bend slightly in order to go through.

For two days Dave barely ventured from the four whitewashed cottage walls. He worked his way through two tattered thrillers and watched television until he was so bored he could stand it no longer. The small parlour became claustrophobic and his gloom deepened by the hour. By lunchtime on the third day he could stand it no longer and was ready to take on Daley or anyone else who tried to stop him. It took him the best part of ninety minutes to walk to the tiny village and find the Royal Oak, a red-bricked building he’d noticed on his way through.

The bar itself was typical of the country pub: panelled walls covered in watery prints of the hunt, treated ceiling joists and a spitting log fire that threatened the clothes of anyone standing within two yards of it. The fire was absurd. It was August and the temperature even outside was in the mid-seventies.

A balding publican wearing a RAF moustache and tie stood behind his bar next to a heavily made-up woman in her fifties who might have been his wife. There were a few others in the room, a cross section of rural life: some elderly couples sitting around the edge, some men playing dominoes, and a group of youngsters standing at the bar. Quite naturally most of them glanced his way; it was that sort of place, off the beaten track, seldom visited by strangers; a corner of England still entrenched in the first half of the century. Dave ordered a bitter and carried the drink to the far end of the bar, away from the youngsters.

A screech of brakes and the slamming of car doors heralded the arrival of a tall youth who led in a woman wearing spectacles. Before the other youngsters gathered around, her glance skated across the room and fell momentarily on Dave. In that instant he felt that he knew her. She was in her mid-thirties, a straw-blonde, attractive without being beautiful. Her mood was fickle as though she was unsure of herself; smiling to share a joke perhaps, smiling out of politeness, composed for an introduction then deliberate to cover a stifled yawn. She was older than the others and uncomfortable. There was something puzzling about her apprehension. Her movements were uncomplicated and confident, but her expression, more particularly in her brown eyes, gave a clue to her restlessness: she was bored.

With every opening of the street door more people arrived in small groups until the room became crowded and noisy. Smoke, curling in layers about the yellowing lampshades was whipped into spirals by the draught. Most of the youngsters were of similar stock to those found in any country public house but there were exceptions: the pedigreed, the bloodstock, parading.

Dave decided it was time to leave. He'd been warned away from gatherings. In any case he was sick of the spoon-fed crap he was hearing. He finished his drink and noticed that the bright eyes slightly enlarged by the spectacles had fastened on to him again. Her face, framed by her curling blond hair, held a trace of amusement. Her wide mouth broke into a faint smile. It wasn't friendly, or even a greeting. Dave felt momentarily flustered. He was amazed at the feeling. He wondered whether he'd been staring, for it was that knowing sort of look she gave him. Her escort, one of those exceptions, diverted her attention.

Dave made his way from the bar and found a small grocery store that doubled as the off-licence. He purchased a copy of *The Telegraph*, a copy of Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* – he'd seen the film starring Edward Fox a couple of years previously and thoroughly enjoyed it – some fresh bread and milk, and two bottles of Famous Grouse – the vodka they carried was a cheap make he'd never heard of – and began the long walk home. He'd covered a hundred yards or so when he caught sight of his minder, the shotgun held loosely in his arms. Dave chuckled to himself. His father had been right. It was not going to be a holiday. Even so, under the afternoon sun the beech trees around the village church were still and the hedgerows sparkled and by the time he reached the cottage there was some country colour to his city skin.

He dreamt of the Smoke, the picture-post-card city: Tower Bridge, the river, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, the stations, the complex road systems cutting through the grand buildings and the superstores with their vast windows of glistening goods, from the sleek opulence of Knightsbridge to the East End traps, from the King's Road to Berwick Street, from Piccadilly decorated in superficial neon to St James', from the abortion clinics around Oxford Circus marked for the overnight visitors who carried their unwanted lumps by the Post Office Tower, to St Paul's Cathedral, where perhaps those visitors could stop to pray for the souls they left behind.

Thunder crashed and Dave sat up sweating. The strong North Sea wind gusted, trees swayed and creaked and rain beat the cottage walls, and above the clamour of nature came the sounds of a slamming door.

Armed with a torch he'd discovered earlier and wearing a huge canvas raincoat that he found hanging on the kitchen door, he went out to the sheds. The loose door was swinging on the last of the four sheds used as storage space for gardening equipment and an assortment of rusty tools. He wasn't surprised to find a series of wet footprints on the dusty surface of the shed floor. His minder, Joe Daley, had been doing his rounds and no doubt stopped for shelter. He heard the pigs grunting in the next shed. The wind strengthened and rushed through the trees. Dave secured the door, pulled up the wide lapel and splashed back to the cottage.

It was late morning when Joe Daley pulled up in a battered green Austin. Dave was leaning on the orchard fence watching the pigs wallow in the spongy ground. The sun glared from a clear sky into air purified by the night rain. The subtle gradations of light and shade were lost. Daley's huge shoulders bunched over the wheel as he pulled on the hand brake. Driving had taken all his concentration. His eyes were curiously threatening.

"Getting around a bit?" He spoke slowly and Dave got the impression that Daley was unsettled.

“Just getting rid of the cobwebs.”

The eyes narrowed.

“You’ve been getting rid of a few these last few days.”

Dave shrugged and turned back to the pigs.

Daley pulled a sour face. He grunted his resignation. “The boss wants to see you. Dinner. I’ll pick you up at eight. Be ready.”

Dave smiled. So that was it. The invitation had annoyed the big man. Special treatment for the man from the Smoke was playing on Daley’s nerves. Wet-nursing him was probably irritating enough, checking the grounds in the middle of the night in the middle of a thunderstorm was damned uncomfortable, but actually picking him up and acting as chauffeur was an absolute shit.

That evening in a sprawling manor house situated beyond a series of low-slung, red-bricked buildings that housed stables and a swimming pool, Dave met Coddy Hughes for the first time.

His father had once told him about Coddy and a friendship that had developed over the years. His high regard for the man was clear from the outset. He’d described Coddy as a thick-bodied man almost bald even at that young age, with a circular scar right between the eyes. Coddy said it was a bullet that had bounced off his thick skull but his father had discovered later that it had been from a wooden arrow fired from a bow by Coddy himself. The arrow had snapped and whipped back at Coddy’s face. He had been nine years old at the time and fortunate to escape with his sight intact. Not many people knew the truth. The bullet sounded better.

Dave met a sixty-two-year-old bald man who wore a neck brace and needed a walking-frame to get about. He was thin and weak and the only hint of his past came from his eyes, fearless and faintly mocking. Time had been unkind; a car accident in his fifties, a whiplash, had left him crippled and all but housebound.

It proved to be a homely affair with Coddy heading the table, eating one-handed while his other rested permanently on a silver-topped walking stick, his wife, Mavis, to his left and Dave opposite her. Three others, girls aged six, ten and twelve, sat at the bottom end of the gleaming table. They were involved in other things, whispers and chatter and girlish giggles. They were the daughters of Coddy’s daughter who was out for the evening, Coddy told him and added, “Such a handful they need a minder a piece!”

Dave felt uncomfortable, conscious that they were all watching him. Once dinner was over Mavis took the girls through to an adjoining room to play Scrabble and left Dave and Coddy together. It was time for business.

“The girls have taken to you,” he said in quiet, clipped tones. He waved his free hand. “It’s the accent. They’re all mad about David Essex. All I’ve been hearing for three years is *Rock On*, and posters for *That’ll Be the Day* cover their bedroom walls.” His eyes narrowed and Dave guessed

it was time for the real business. “You went to the Oak. It’s not a good idea. Your father has asked me to look after you until he can sort out the trouble. How can I look after you if you don’t take advice?”

Coddy leant forward in his chair and filled two glasses with whisky. He pushed one across the table then settled back in his chair again.

“The village is a small place with few secrets; the stranger stands out like a nigger in the Royal Family. If you need for something you let Joe know what you want and he’ll get it for you.” He raised his head slightly from the pink neck brace and emphasized coldly, “This is not a request. You understand?”

Dave nodded. A mix of embarrassment and admiration ran through him. He understood immediately what his father had been getting at. Coddy’s authority was clear-cut, without the need of a raised voice or the lesser man’s posturing. It remained beneath the surface, and was all the more marked because of it.

“All I want to do is get back to civilization,” he said quietly, and added defensively, “No one is going to look for me up here.”

“Dave, it’s where I’ve chosen to live, and as small and as peaceful as it seems, it’s on the map. It’s my HQ. And that makes it important.” He raised his glass and emptied it before continuing. “You can guarantee that our friends across the pond have at least one contact up here because of me. Sure, it’s off the beaten track and it might seem safe, but don’t drop your guard. These people have a network bigger than the CIA. I don’t expect trouble, especially if you keep your head down, but you’ve got to understand, there’s no such thing as a certainty. Not in our business.” He mellowed and his eyes lost their edge. “It’s not so bad. Your father tells me he hopes to have it sorted in two or three weeks.”

Dave’s heart sank. Three more weeks in the country would drive him crazy. He’d already seen enough trees to last him a lifetime and as for the damp air that came in off the North Sea, it was simply not healthy. Coddy nodded as he recognized Dave’s despair.

“I’ll send the girls around to keep you company. That will get them from under my feet for a while. They love the pigs. They go out collecting the acorns.” He sighed and went on, “The summer holidays are too long. All I’m hearing all day is noise, pop music. Poofers leaping about the stages – and some of them even wear make-up. Can you believe that? It’s difficult to tell if they’re men or women. That Bowie guy started it all, I’m sure of it. You wouldn’t know whether to shake their hands or fuck them. I don’t know what the world’s coming to. It isn’t the one I remember. God help us if there’s ever another war. They’d be carrying a compact in their kitbags.” He shook his head in despair and pointed to the bottle of malt on the table.

Dave took his cue and poured out more drinks.

“I prefer this to brandy,” Coddy said and swallowed two measures. “I shouldn’t drink at all with all the pills.” He pulled a dry face. “I’ve gone through life doing things I shouldn’t, so what the hell!”

Dave settled back, feeling more comfortable in the old man’s company. It might have been the booze, he considered, but he had a feeling it was more than that. He said, “I know you met my father during the war but he’s never discussed it. As far as he’s concerned the war never happened.”

Coddy nodded reflectively, “That’s not a bad thing. Some men never stop talking about it.”

“It was only recently that we discovered he’d caught one in the shoulder. He didn’t tell us. It was an old-timer who used to box for Peter Woodhead told my brother Tommy all about it. When we asked Dad about it all we got was a shake of the head and something about a scratch on the shoulder.”

Coddy gave a wry smile and shook his head, an awkward movement against the neck brace. He said, “That’s a bloody gem. A scratch on the shoulder, you say?” He laughed out loud.

It was the first time Dave had seen any humour in the man. He toyed with the crystal, turning the glass, waiting for an explanation.

Coddy swallowed half his drink. At length he said, “You ever heard of Scratch Fox?”

Dave shook his head.

“Scratch Fox was a sergeant in your old man’s outfit. It was just before the war started. They were on manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain when one of the squaddies got himself injured and needed stitching up. Fox had your father drive him and the squaddie back to the hospital but it meant kipping overnight at Fox’s married quarters. During that night your father crept out of the house and drove into town to take care of a couple of small-time villains who’d put your granddaddy out of action.”

“Took care of them?”

Coddy nodded and explained, “Years earlier they’d cut up your granddaddy for not coughing up protection. Your granddaddy was left bedridden. It led to him topping himself.”

Dave knew that his grandfather had drowned in the Thames; he hadn’t known that it had been suicide.

“What happened?”

“Your dad took care of it. He waited ten years for the right moment.”

“He topped them?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Cuddy paused then went on, “Unfortunately, in the early morning the sergeant heard him get back. But when the filth eventually arrived Fox gave your dad an alibi. He never did understand why the sergeant lied to the police but as it turned out, Fox was the lucky one. Back home everyone knew what had happened. They treated your father differently. The thing unspoken remained between them; not respect, exactly, unless it was the respect you have for dangerous things. When war broke out they ended up in France. Sergeant Fox got half his head blown away in Dunkirk, the town. The same volley caught your dad in the shoulder. They were left behind. That’s the way it was. The stretcher-bearers would pick them up later. Trouble was, the stretchers had enough to do on the beaches. Your dad carried the sergeant down to the beach on his good shoulder and found what was left of the squad, which wasn’t much. He was pretty busted up himself by then. Between the two of them they looked like something out of a butcher’s window.”

He paused to fill his glass then went to top up Dave’s and saw that it was still full.

“You want a beer?” The question was clipped and disapproving.

Dave lifted his glass and said, “This is fine.”

“Listen, son, a conversation that stops you drinking isn’t worth holding.”

Dave finished his drink in one and offered the glass for a refill. He said, “You’re telling me things I’ve never heard.”

Cuddy smiled briefly in acceptance.

“It’s a funny business, Dave: that as you get older and the war gets further away, you dwell on it more and more. In the end your memory turns it from being some kind of fucking horror story into something you enjoyed. I suppose that’s why so many of the old guys go back to the battlefields. They’re getting off on what their memories made of it. They’ve started to believe their own stories.” Cuddy grunted dismissively and went on, “The glory! The few! All the heroic stuff! We were running backwards like no one ever ran before. And as for all those little boats! The navy must get really pissed off hearing about them. It was chaos. Carnage is the word. There were bodies all over the shop, gutted, blown to bits, stinking. The stink was unbelievable. It took weeks to wash it off. There were legs and arms and heads lying all over the place. You could have played a game of bowls with the number of heads you saw in the street. The planes never stopped. Getting on a boat during those first few days was impossible. At one stage they stopped taking stretcher cases. Your dad and the sergeant got a change of clothes from a couple of bodies. Not that Fox could do much. He was unconscious for most of the time. No one thought he’d make it. The rest of the squad had to hide both of them to get them on board, made out they were pissed on red wine. They were only taking able-bodied by then. Anyway, they made it.

“Outside Dover all the old people’s homes, schools and the like, had been converted into casualty clearing stations. It was in a place called Cheriton that I first met your old man. I caught one in the neck so I must have looked a bit like Scratch Fox.” Cuddy touched a red scar that ran below his left ear. “Mine was fucking stupid; not even a Jerry bullet. One of our own guys was

fucking about. You'd be surprised how many of our guys got shot by our own side. Anyway, these places were only holding units until you were well enough to transfer to a proper hospital and that could have been anywhere in the country. Everyone in the ward was pretty poorly. The guy who ended up in the next bed to mine had a bullet through his shoulder and was down with pneumonia and God knows what else. He was unconscious for two days and more dead than alive. That was your dad. We spent a week together in that shit-house."

The time approached eleven; the war was spent and so was Dave's description of the family and London in general. They'd opened a second bottle of malt when the sounds of a car halting on gravel marked the arrival of the tall youth from the pub, and close on his heels, in tight trousers and open-necked shirt, the woman.

She asked Cuddy, "Hello Daddy, are we interrupting?"

"No, we've just about finished it. Come in and have a drink. This is Dave Smith. You've heard me mention his father. This is Pat, my daughter, and her boyfriend, James Osbourne."

"Hello," Dave said but the word got caught in his throat.

Cuddy Hughes splashed whisky as he poured more drinks. The couple carried them to the bar stools at the far end of the room. Dave forced himself from the sneaked glance; he found her incredibly attractive; had it not been for similar feelings during their previous encounter he would have put it down to the malt. He heard them talking while he talked to Cuddy, her low voice polished of its accent with only hints of Lincolnshire. They discussed everything and nothing in particular. She was there, on the periphery of everything, even when he faced the other way, easing off her seat to reach over the bar, stretching material across her wide hips, scratching her knee, raising her glass, beating a silent rhythm with her loose foot; a continuous movement to attract the eye.

Cuddy leant forward.

"James is a bit of a wanker," he said quietly, with a knowing glint in his eye. Whether the statement was rhetorical or an indication of Cuddy's true feelings toward his daughter's boyfriend or just to make Dave feel less impassioned was hard to tell.

Chapter 3

The following morning Dave decided to call London. He was itching for news of what was happening. He left his breakfast dishes on the table and began the walk to a kiosk he'd noticed on the seafront. The sky was clear overhead but streaked with cloud in front. A helicopter hovered over the sea, a speck; the constant hum of its rotor sounding like a distant lawnmower. The lane ran to a slow bend. The trees, thickly grouped closer to the cottage, thinned out until there were bare clearings of shortly cropped grass on either side. The land flattened and he

caught sight of the distant red box standing incongruously before the sand dunes. It was a fairly warm morning; the breeze had dropped to a whisper and the air was charged. Before long, perspiration trickled under his shirt like some fast little insect.

The helicopter swept overhead, a startling roaring blur, close enough to look threatening and fanning the wind his way. It plunged with surprising speed and swooped back to hover before him, keeping pace. He could make out the detail of its belly and the two men through its open sides who were taking more than a casual interest in him. For a moment he considered that they were Cuddy's men. He hoped they were. It hovered for about thirty seconds – it seemed longer – then soared away inland, across Cuddy Hughes' manor, cutting a grey smear across the blue until it became a speck again and then disappeared altogether. The hum refused to fade, a constant intimidation, as though the machine had cut through nature itself and left its mark.

The lane narrowed over a humpback bridge across a slow-moving stream. On the other side the grass was coarser and tufted, the earth coloured with stretches of light sand. Pools of black water dotted the area, shrunken so that the rings of dark mud at their edges dried out in stages, the outer layers cracked and lifted in a mosaic pattern of brownish hues.

Dave reached the telephone when the sun was at its peak; it was unbearably hot inside and he kept the door wedged open. A minute later he was through to Jimmy Jones.

“You OK, Dave?”

“No, I'm not.”

“Where are you?”

“I'm down on the farm, my son, knee deep in pig shit. The smell's so bad it makes the eyes water.”

“That's what comes of playing about, Dave. Women are dangerous. You should have learned. Where's the farm?”

“It doesn't matter where. Just tell me what's happening?”

“It's too quiet for comfort. Something's going down but everyone's being cagey. There's people asking about you, and it ain't a birthday present they've got in mind!”

“Who's asking?”

“No names, just blank faces and a lot of whispers. But there's no doubt about it. It's you they want. What's going on?”

Dave ignored the question and asked, “Yanks?”

“Rock Hudson look-alikes, I’d say. Clean cut, shiny suits, cowboy boots, flashing white teeth from here to Southend, know what I mean? They couldn’t be more obvious if they were wearing Stetsons, riding horses and shooting everything that moved.”

“Does the old man know?”

“Are you kidding? Tell me something going down in the Smoke that he doesn’t know about?”

“Has he said anything?”

“Only that you’re on holiday. He’s sent you away to dry out your liver, on doctor’s orders. It’s official. But everyone that counts knows it’s a load of bollocks.”

“Let’s keep it that way. It’ll blow over. Don’t worry. I’m keeping my head down for a while. Tell the boys to do the same. If you’ve got problems that can’t wait, then get in touch with Barry and he’ll let the old man know.”

“We could get hold of these geezers, Dave. Find out who’s asking the questions?”

“Blimey, don’t do that! I already know who it is. Just stay loose. I’ll be in touch.”

“Take care, Dave. I don’t like the sound of this.”

“I’ll make out. Just tell everyone to watch their backs.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Yeah.”

“See you.”

It was a relief to leave the kiosk and feel a breath of air. The sounds of the gentle waves washing in and the soulful cries from white birds that glided overhead enticed him over the bank of fine sand. He saw the horse first, about twenty yards from him, its thin reins hanging loosely, chestnut coat gleaming across its bare back. It stood head bowed, snorting. Behind the horse a trail of pits in the dry sand created a path to the damp firmer stuff at the water’s edge where the prints became more defined and trailed off across the beach.

The girls stood in the sea facing the horizon, calf deep until a swell and then the water lifted to the shoulders of the shortest and to the waist of Patricia Hughes. Dave was to discover later that since her divorce she’d reverted to her maiden name. They skipped and splashed. Their girlish yelps and laughter carried across to him. They seemed totally unaware of being watched. The four of them were naked, their clothes scattered across the beach. Dave’s breath was swept away as he watched, captivated, barely able to move. The bodies spanned perhaps thirty years but he would never have guessed it; the curves were as firm as they had ever been. He was looking at a

bunch of golden nymphs, semidivine guardians of nature itself. He could have enjoyed watching them play indefinitely but reserve, maybe a fear that they might discover him, turned him round.

On the road he emptied sand from his shoes and started back. He searched above the distant line of trees for signs of the helicopter but couldn't find it and guessed that it was retreating from the quickly approaching clouds. The sky had become dark and threatening with tufts of cloud breaking free and racing in from thicker stuff off the coast, casting moving shadows on the road ahead. He increased his pace. There was rain in the heavy air and beating it to the cottage would take some doing. The sound of hooves clattered behind him and he turned to see the woman. Her straw-coloured hair was wet and flattened even more by spectacles used as a headband. She'd dressed in a short thigh-length towelling robe. Looking directly ahead she manoeuvred the horse beside him. Her eyes sparkled in amusement. Or was it provocation? She seemed to know exactly how much he was unsettled and was intent on stringing it out. Her loose leg dangled freely beside him, perhaps a yard away, brushing the chestnut coat. Her robe, buttoned at the midriff, fell away either side exposing a blue wedge of bikini bottom against her pale skin. Dave pulled his gaze away and glanced up. There was a terrible glint in her eye. Without warning she kicked and moved ahead and the horse broke into a canter. He watched her round the bend, grateful that she had gone.

The first rumblings of thunder rippled ominously, forcing his pace, and when it died it left a hum of singing voices carried, presumably, from a wedding at the village church. He reached the cottage just as the first heavy splashes of rain dotted the ground.

The horse was tethered beneath the awning along the cottage wall. It backed around, stamping, unsettled by the approaching storm. Dave felt heady, adrenalin reached out to every nerve end. He was amazed by his own nervousness. He sensed the danger, a familiar feeling, and one that he normally enjoyed, and yet the warning signs tightened his chest, as if serious injury – even life itself – was on the line. Perhaps the knowledge that it was Cuddy Hughes' daughter made the difference. He pushed open the door and lifted the dimness inside. She faced him, framed in a brighter square of light, perched on the edge of the wooden table with her toes barely touching the stone floor, her hands gripping the top to hold her balance. Her spectacles lay on the table next to the pile of breakfast dishes. She was smiling at his expression or at the chorus of '*All Things Bright and Beautiful*' that the increasing breeze carried through the open door. Her bright eyes flickered. Her lips parted and her smile fluttered, first in apprehension and then to something else, perhaps a dare. The robe was undone exposing her long neck, the valley between her swollen breasts, her midriff with its faint gleam of down and the blue material beneath. With her back arched over the table, she threw out the final challenge, and the gap between her legs increased.

Her wet, salty mouth locked on to his. His hand moved instinctively between her legs, bringing a gasp from her mouth that sent hot air into his. Her legs clamped around his waist parting his way, dampening the material more than the sea. He tasted the seawater that trickled from her hair, eyes, nose and mouth, convinced that she would suffocate beneath him.

Lightning cracked out of the darkening sky and it thundered again with an almighty crash that shook every window in the cottage. Even the breakfast dishes rattled together and the milk bottle jumped. The tempest was on them, inside and out.

There was no tenderness in this coming together. He tore down her bikini bottom and she tore open his flies. She cried out and he grunted. It was brutish and they ended it on the floor, their chests heaving and their mouths open as they gulped for breath. The tablecloth had come down on top of them, splattering them with milk and cold coffee and preserve. For a while they lay, raw, unable to move, against the thick table legs on the cold stone tiles.

She whispered thickly, “That wasn’t making love. That was war.”

Across half a mile of countryside, getting fainter all the time, down the lane, across the garden and through the open door, fading to a murmur before it reached their ears, the vicar said, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,” and the congregation, “Amen.”

She stirred and stood, straddling him, gazing down at him through the strands of blond hair that fell over her face. Lumps of preserve became unstuck from her stomach and splattered on to him, spilt coffee and milk found its path southward through the dark curls and down her thighs. He looked up at her, at the display between her legs.

“They’re going to need a spaceship to get my bollocks back-” he began but was cut short.

She raised her finger and hushed him. He watched her move, still feeding on her movement, as she stepped across him and slipped on her robe. She picked up her bikini briefs and spectacles and without a backward glance went out of the cottage. He waited for the sounds of the horse on the tarmac, visualizing her nakedness on its back, thinking of the wet patch that would shortly stain the chestnut hair as she drained all that he’d put there.

While the bath filled Dave checked himself in the cracked mirror above the basin. His eyes were still red and fierce, still flushed by the victory. Her scent was trapped in the dried white flakes she’d left behind but this was going to go the way of the preserve and cold coffee. He drank a quarter of one of the bottles of scotch he’d purchased in the village and carried the remainder to the bath where he climbed gingerly into the hot water. Gradually the stinging disappeared leaving a positive glow and a feeling of drowsiness so heavy that it was difficult to move an arm.

The door opened and cut through the steam.

She stood in the doorway and leant against the frame. An expression of mild annoyance did not match the sparkle in her eye.

“I reached the corner and decided there was no way I could present myself like this. I thought of falling off the horse but that wouldn’t be convincing, would it? I mean, what on earth did I fall in to cover myself with marmalade and milk and for God’s sake, love bites? Look!” She swept back the robe to show a mark just below the elastic at the back of her briefs. “Not that I need an excuse, but it might raise Daddy’s eyebrows. He’s very old-fashioned and I’m not sure he

approves of you to begin with. Anyway, I didn't expect any of that. I look as though I've been through a war zone!" Her top lip was swollen and there was a red patch on her chin caused by his stubble. "Anyway, it's peeing down out there."

She didn't have to tell him. The rain was beating hard against the window.

She moved into the room and gave it the once over. "Oh my God, it's even worse than downstairs. Are you sure we won't catch something?" She dropped the robe and wriggled out of her bikini. "Move up," she said and climbed in, tap end. The water flushed over the side before it settled below the overflow. He noticed the skin beginning to redden around her dark nipples.

"Here." She handed him the flannel. "You do it. You caused it." There was a look in her eye that might have been affection. He hadn't noticed it before.

"You caused it Patricia. It was all down to you."

"Did I?" she countered. "You took my clothes off in the Royal Oak, and then again at the manor. James can get very jealous, you know, and you did make it pretty obvious. Even Daddy noticed it."

Dave shook his head. He'd have to watch these country folk. He grinned and said, "That was just wishful thinking. I never thought it would come to anything. What did you expect me to do?"

Even though the rain still pelted against the glass the cloud must have parted for sunlight tumbled in from the small square window high in the wall, shafting through the steam.

She said, "The storm is almost over."

"It could easily start again."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I saw you on the beach earlier, with the girls."

"We noticed. We saw you arrive."

He tried to hide his surprise and said, "They're all yours? You're in good nick for three kids."

"I'm in good nick period, if you don't mind."

He nodded agreement. "What happened to their dad?"

"We fell out."

"Does he see the kids?"

She shook her head and said, “He’s never seen Tracy. She’s six. We haven’t seen him since then. Daddy says we’ll never see him again. He probably paid him off.”

Dave nodded, hiding his thoughts. He wanted more but it wasn’t going to come.

Her glance flashed over the small room then settled back on him. “This room has a certain primitive charm but there’s a definite smell of mould.”

“That’s the laundry basket under the basin. Someone must have been keeping old socks in it.”

“Now you’ve ruined the picture. What’s wrong with the smell of the thatched roof after the rain?”

“What am I, a poet?”

“No, you’re a gangster.” A smile lit her face. She crossed her arms around her knees and leant back with her head between the taps. Beads of perspiration collected on her forehead. “In the pub you were staring at me. Apart from taking off my clothes what else were you thinking?”

“You looked out of place,” he said. His feelings were intense, sharpened by knowledge yet tempered by guilt. Or rather, he felt he should have felt guilty. He felt that he’d abused Cuddy Hughes’ hospitality.

She touched her breast and flinched, then examined the small nipple and the bruising. “You did that,” she said thickly.

“Yes.”

She laughed and reached for the bottle. The scotch burned and she coughed. She said, “God, I hate this stuff.” She eased her legs down between his and pressed him with her toes, her knees lowered sufficiently to reveal her hair broken by refraction. He grew against her foot. “Tell me about you?”

“I’m not married,” he said.

“I know that much.”

“I’m in the family business.”

“I know that too. What else?”

“I’ve got a flat in London, above one of the clubs. You might have heard of it – The Tower.”

She nodded. “Who hasn’t? What about girls?”

“There’s nothing about girls.”

“I’ve heard differently.”

“Who told you that?”

She smiled. Her front tooth was slightly crooked.

“What happened to the kids?” he asked.

“They took the short cut home. I had to bring Juliet, the horse, the long way. Tracy, Jackie and Jessica – Jessica’s the eldest. She’s twelve. Tracy is the apple in her granddad’s eye. She always has been. He makes up for absent fathers.”

Dave nodded reflectively. “I can’t picture Cuddy Hughes with kids on his knee.”

“You’d be surprised how domesticated my dad is. I took them all to London once, to see the shows, about two years ago. Tracy was too young really. We stayed at the Hilton overlooking Hyde Park. We had the penthouse suite.”

Dave studied her thoughtfully, wondering whether it was her way of telling him that she knew all about the American girl and the trouble that he was in. She hadn’t once asked what he was doing up here and it was the obvious question.

“Daddy takes us away twice a year,” she continued. “But he can’t get around like he used to so we’re a bit restricted with locations. Long hauls are a bit out of the question.”

“You’ve not thought of moving away? Getting a place of your own?”

“I’ve got as much freedom as I need. I’m thirty-four. Daddy accepts that. No questions. No restrictions. Discussions centre on the girls, their schooling and so on. He likes me to get out. He’d like me to meet someone.”

“He doesn’t like James.”

“Oh, I know that.” She raised her eyebrows. “James is all right.”

Dave threw her a quizzical look.

“He’s safe. He’s very rich, legitimately so, or at least his parents are, and he’s not likely to end up in prison or in some gutter with a knife in his back.”

“Sweetheart, you’re shooting in the dark. I’m not going to end up that way either.”

“Huh! You’re about as safe as safe sex the Catholic way! Have you ever seen the size of Irish families? That’s how Tracy arrived!”

She shivered. Perhaps the conversation had cooled her. The water was still hot.

Dave pulled the plug and led her to the bedroom to hunt out softer towels. She stood head bowed and let him dry her. He was gentle, particularly around the cuts on her knees. He knelt behind her, wiping her legs before drawing open the towel like a pair of curtains to reveal her trim behind. He felt an urge to bury his face between her as if devouring her would be the final satisfaction.

“You leave my bum alone,” she said. She turned around inside the towel. She held her legs closely together. Her slender hand did not entirely cover the extremities or the parting beneath. He let the towel fall. She moved her hand.

“You’re looking from a purely aesthetic point of view, of course?”

“I think so. What’s it mean?”

“It means that I’m going to fall over if you keep doing that.”

He picked her up easily and carried her to the bed.

He felt her tremble.

“Be tender with me this time,” she said.

They spent the following few days together. Even in that short time she seemed to have changed. She radiated; her complexion and her character smouldered as though fired by some inner furnace. It was impossible not to recognize the sparkle, the confidence, and the added spring to her step.

On Thursday she couldn’t make it; she was taking the children into Lincoln. Dave found himself in the bar of the Royal Oak again. He knew that it was a mistake and that he was going against the express wishes of Cuddy Hughes but things had moved on from there. It was lunchtime and the bar was surprisingly empty. The balding man served him and then went out to his cellars. He stood at the bar and considered finishing his drink quickly and getting out before any harm was done. The door opened. It was too late. And as soon as he recognized James Osbourne he knew it meant trouble.

Backed up by two friends, Osbourne walked directly up to Dave and said, “I want a word with you.”

Dave turned to face him and said, “What can I do for you?”

“I want to make it clear to you that Patricia and I have been seeing one another for quite some time and that we have an understanding.”

“Fine,” Dave said. “That’s quite clear. Is that it?”

“I want you to keep away from her. You have nothing in common; you do not fit in. Is all that absolutely plain enough for you?”

Dave shifted his glance to Osbourne’s friends who stood just behind. He gave them his best effort at a conciliatory smile. He didn’t need this. Cuddy had warned him. He was supposed to be lying low, keeping out of trouble. Backing down went against the grain. That upset him more than anything else. In normal circumstances Osbourne would already be chewing on the floorboards.

“There’s no need for any of this,” he said.

“I want your word that you’ll leave her alone.”

Dave sighed and said, “I’m sorry, my son, but you’re talking to the wrong person. If you have a future with Pat you should be discussing it with her, and not in public.”

“I’m not your son, Dave. And the discussion is with you. If you don’t mind we’ll leave Patricia out of it.”

Dave shrugged and turned back to the bar. He lifted his pint mug. James Osbourne prodded Dave’s arm and some of the drink splashed on to the bar surface. A dark veil drew across Dave’s eyes and he said, “Don’t do that.”

Osbourne prodded again.

“I’m talking to you,” he said loudly. “Do we have an understanding?”

Dave’s beer mug exploded on the side of James Osbourne’s face and sent him sprawling across table and chairs. Before he’d landed firmly on the floor and before his friends had moved, Dave’s shoe sank into his groin. It was over in seconds. Osbourne lay paralysed on his back as frothy blood poured from his mouth and nose.

Dave placed the handle of his pint mug on the bar and turned to the others. “I told him not to do it again.”

Open mouthed, they nodded in agreement, their shocked eyes fixed on Osbourne’s shattered face.

The barman appeared from the back and made suitable threats. As Dave left the bar the others rushed to aid their friend.

Dave anticipated the next move. He knew that the police wouldn’t get involved and he guessed that James Osbourne would cause no further trouble – Cuddy wouldn’t allow it – but he knew also that Cuddy wouldn’t let it rest there.

He was in the orchard when the car pulled up. The sun had just cleared the treetops to begin its dissipation of the early morning mist. Two men armed with shotguns left the black Rolls and called him over. The rear door was pushed open and Dave found Cuddy Hughes sitting stiffly in the seat, his cane held upright between his knees.

“Morning,” Dave said apprehensively while trying to gauge the man’s mood. It wasn’t good; he could tell that much from the tight lips and burning eyes. He wondered who would be mentioned first, Cuddy’s daughter or James Osbourne. He was more nervous at the prospect of hearing Patricia’s name than that of Osbourne’s. Even though he hadn’t seen Pat since the fight her scent was still about him; he drew it in with every breath, the musky scent of female sex, unmistakable and yet personalized, unique. It was in his nose and throat, in his hair. Cuddy couldn’t fail to recognize it.

“David, get in a while,” Cuddy said calmly.

The armed men spread out either side of the car, guns no longer broken, and he wasn’t convinced it was just a show of muscle. He climbed in and sat beside the diminutive figure.

“What’s happened?”

“You’ve happened. You’ve arrived in my village like World War Three!”

Dave studied his new adversary. “I’m sorry about what happened. Let’s cut straight to it, shall we?”

“I’m sorry too, Dave. You let me down. You let your father down. You seem to have some kind of death wish about you. You carry it around like a sign, neon lit. My feelings for your father are holding back what I’d like to say to you, but I’m surprised he hasn’t taught you self-control.”

“Is he all right?”

“James? All right? Well now, apart from his bollocks being somewhere in the next county and his front teeth chewing on his arsehole, I’d say he wasn’t too fucking tickled.”

Dave held on to a smile. Eventually he said, “I know about you, Mr Hughes. And I know that it’s only these last few years that have slowed you down. If someone came in and started pushing you around, you’d have killed the guy. There’d have been no second chances. I gave this guy every chance to back off. I was almost grovelling, for Christ sakes.”

“We’ve got nothing else to discuss,” Cuddy said coldly.

“Yes we have and it’s more important than James Osbourne or any other public school shit, no matter who his father is. These bastards only think they’re in charge.”

Cuddy threw up a hand and sighed. “I know what’s been going on. I’m not stupid. Even Patricia’s mother thinks she’s sniffing glue or swallowing pills by the handful.”

Dave's mouth was dry. Without realizing it he was digging his fingernails into his palms.

"I know that Patricia has obviously found some qualities in you that are attractive. Frankly, I have not. You don't actually inspire confidence, Dave. You came here with a heavy reputation, and your actions since then have given me no reason to doubt it. The reason you were sent here in the first place is because you think with your dick. Down south, so I'm told, there's a joke that Dave Smith would fuck anything in a skirt, including the odd Scot! You heard it? It's not very funny. I'm not laughing." He paused for a moment and then said, "If you're only good for one tenth of your reputation then you're not to be trusted within a mile of any woman. And by God, that includes my daughter!"

"These things are always exaggerated. It would take some kind of superman to do some of the things I've been accused of."

"Maybe," Cuddy said. "But when all this is over I'd like you to go back to London, put some space between you. If in three months you still have feelings for one another we can take it from there."

"I can't do that. Patricia isn't a girl anymore. She knows what she wants. And if she wants me it's going to take an army to keep me from her. If she doesn't want to see me I'll never bother her again. But she's going to tell me. Not you, Sir."

Cuddy raised an eyebrow in surprise. Suddenly he smiled and there was something approaching affection in his eyes.

"I'm going to leave it there for now, young man. There'll be no more visits to the village. Is that understood?"

Dave nodded.

The affection vanished. Cuddy grimaced and said, "I'll speak to my daughter."

Dave climbed out of the car and watched Cuddy's men get in and moments later the car roared off.

It rained through the afternoon and the weak light barely found its way into the cottage. Dave bathed early and towelled himself down while watching from the bedroom window for Patricia's arrival.

He was nervous at the prospect of meeting her again. It came down to violence and whether she thought his treatment of James Osbourne was justified. It came down to her attitude over the use of violence to settle an argument. He wondered how much she knew about her father's line of work and whether she accepted that it hadn't been his refined manners and his persuasive abilities over the conference table that had led him to the top. He wondered whether she accepted also that some men could never be pushed around, no matter what the consequences.

He heard the car before he saw it, a metallic BMW. It flashed past the short expanse of lane that he could see. A moment later came a screech of brakes. Two men in dark suits appeared at the entrance to the drive. The drizzle didn't seem to bother them as they looked around before walking almost nonchalantly toward the cottage. The black automatics they held seemed to cut holes through the dripping grey.

Dave was stunned. The implications were still sinking in as he saw the men duck for cover behind a low hedgerow, their attention directed toward the orchard.

Two flat explosions rattled the window. Dave leant closer to the glass to bring the orchard into view. Joe Daley stood under the trees, his raised shotgun smoking. He had already broken it and was bringing fresh cartridges from his pocket. He was standing there as if taking part in a pheasant shoot. Dave mouthed the words, "Get down for God's sake!" But even as the last word silently emerged he heard the clatter of automatic fire and watched Daley sink to the spongy ground. Bullets smacked into the mud around him. Tree bark ripped open. Daley lay still. His gun stuck in the earth and pointed at the low sky. Behind him a sow had her belly torn out. She squealed and slipped then slowly hauled herself from the mud and lumbered away, dragging guts behind her, barely concerned.

Dave moved. He put his weight against the old dressing table and pushed it against the door. He pulled his case from under the bed and tore into it, throwing his clothes aside until he found his .38, a black Smith & Wesson.

The front door crashed open. Glass smashed. He moved back to the window. A dozen coats of paint held it firm. The thump of footsteps sounded on the narrow stairs. He put his shoulder against the frame. The window cracked, the wood splintered, and it opened. The bedroom door thudded into the back of the dressing table. The opening in the window was barely wide enough to take him but he made it, and landed on the awning that ran along the side of the cottage.

The dressing table slid back and the door crashed open. A gun roared. The window smashed and showered him in glass. Dave fired one shot into the room before he lost his footing and skidded on the tin roof. Timber cracked as the awning caved in. He rolled over the lip and landed flat on his back on a freshly turned border. For a moment he lay winded, unable to move.

One of the men had remained at the cottage door and now he came charging around the corner. He was blond, about six-three. Jimmy's description flashed into Dave's mind. He was still lying on his back as he pulled the trigger. The man's blue eyes widened as he realized his mistake. The bullet caught him in the knee. He yelped, spun round and fell backwards, away from Dave. His 12-bore Spatz flew into the air. Dave fired again and saw a neat hole appear in the sole of the man's shoe.

A clatter of fire came from above. Bullets smacked the earth just a foot from Dave's head.

He struggled to his feet, shouting out loud as slivers of glass cut into him. The rain spread ragged tributaries of blood across his pale body. Keeping close to the side of the cottage he ran to the back.

An old fence extended from the side of the cottage across to the outhouses. It was rotten in parts but just about adequate to keep the pigs from wandering. Moving in a crouched position he splashed his way to the sheds. The goon who could still stand was going to have to make the same crossing to get to Dave and that wasn't going to be easy for him.

He crawled into the end shed and wedged open the door. It gave him a perfect view of the cottage.

The rain grew heavier. He began to shiver. Ten minutes went by.

“You'll hear from me mother fucker!” The voice came from the cottage. “There'll be another time, you can be sure of that!”

Minutes later he heard the car doors slam and then the engine. He stayed put for half an hour, until dusk began to fall, then he left the shed and keeping to the line of trees he circled the cottage to the road.

It was the better part of another hour before he chanced the cottage and in that time he examined it from every angle. Eventually he crawled in. He'd just finished checking the place over and was still naked when he heard another car draw to a halt. His heart sank. He pressed himself against the larder wall and held the gun to his chest.

“Dave! Dave!” Patricia's shout carried through the open door. She'd seen the smashed glass, perhaps even sniffed the cordite that still soured the heavy air. She threw on the light. As she saw him her face drained of colour.

He winked. “Hello, sweetheart,” he said and dropped the gun to his side.

“Are you shot? There's so much blood.”

He glanced down. He was covered in mud, head to toe, but in a number of places the mud had turned red.

“I don't think so. It's just a few cuts from the glass. But I'm hurting all over so it's a bit hard to tell.” He moved forward. She stayed motionless by the door. He switched off the light and pulled her away from the doorway before peering out into the darkness.

“What happened?”

“I don't know. I think Daley's had it. He's under the trees. Go and tell your dad what you've seen, will you? He'll know what to do. Stay here till I get to the road then I'll cover you.” He started toward the door.

“You're coming with me,” she said sternly. “If you think I'm leaving you like this you must be joking.”

He nodded, too shattered to argue. “Give me a minute,” he said. “I’ll put on some clothes.”

“You better. Daddy’s very particular about that sort of thing.” She turned up her nose. “You could use a good deodorant, while you’re at it.”

Dave moved into the manor house. A doctor came out to check him over and sew some stitches. Once he’d gone Cuddy admitted sheepishly, “There’s a squealer. North or south I don’t know. I’ll check my end. I imagine your father will do the same in London. It must be someone pretty damned close. Apparently they had a fucking helicopter out.” He glanced up to see the surprise in Patricia’s eyes. He rarely swore in front of the women. “Sorry, baby, but you can’t trust anybody nowadays!”

Patricia filled Dave’s glass with malt. She ignored her father’s. “You were lucky,” Cuddy told him, obviously upset that security on his manor had been breached. “I told you to stay low, didn’t I?” It was the closest Cuddy could get to an apology. And it wasn’t even necessary.

The attack spurred Dave’s father into overdrive. He gave the Americans a foothold in the London casinos where they could clean up their dollar bills – something they’d been hankering after for years. Two days later Cuddy came down to say, “I’ve heard from your father. He’s had to make concessions to get you off the hook, but it’s done. The contracts are cancelled. He wants you home.” He finished. That was it. He walked past the two of them into his study and closed the two large doors behind him.

Patricia turned to him. “Before I came to the cottage that night I went to see James at the hospital. His jaw is wired up. He looks dreadful. I decided then that I didn’t want to see you again. I was coming to tell you.”

Dave nodded. “What changed your mind?”

“Daddy spoke to me while you were with the doctor.”

Dave couldn’t hide his surprise.

“He told me that James got what he deserved, that there were three

of them, that he wouldn’t have been pushed around either. He told me that in our family, as it is in yours, there’s always going to be people who might have a go, that to be safe we need to be around people who are stronger than they are.”

She carried her glass across to him and sat on his lap. She stroked his hair back and kissed him. The drink she held up threatened to spill. “I must be mad getting mixed up with you,” she said lightly. “Daddy told me what you said to him. About it being my decision and not his. And if I made the right one it would take an army to stop you coming for me. Not many people stand up to my father.”

“Well, is it down to you, or not?”

“Of course I make my own decisions.”

“Well, I’m running out of time up here so you’ve got another one to make.”

“I wondered about that. It would be like the marriage of two Royal Families – two manors.”

“Who said anything about getting married?”

“I did,” she said. “You don’t think I’d live with you without a ring, do you? Daddy’s very particular about things like that.”

He reached forward to touch her glass with his and said, “Well then, in that case, I’m not going to argue.”

She tasted the malt. “I hate this stuff,” she said.

Three months later, before a vast reception with Patricia’s three daughters acting as bridesmaids, Dave and Pat were married under the cold Saxon stone of St Mary’s, the village church, by the Reverend Peter Ricketts, a close friend of Cuddy Hughes. His prayers were for David and Patricia and for every member of the united congregation. The union was blessed.

Chapter 4

1986

The Americans had lived in England long enough to have been forgotten by the society they left behind but barely long enough to feel accepted by the new. Their absence was no longer conspicuous; Sharon’s parents were dead and Tony had lost any claim to the rung of the ladder he might have been on. Cocaine had been his downfall; that and booze, and it had led to him being sent to England to work under O’Connell, even though O’Connell was old enough to drop at any moment. Tony considered it a punishment, a kind of exile. If he was remembered at all then it was as an example to young upstarts: ‘You don’t let personal matters jeopardize business,’ and, ‘If you don’t control your temper you’ll end up like Tony Valenti!’

In the UK, the capital of the Old World, he was still an outsider. He paid the taxes and the rates and was generous to strange charities. He attended the local church and the small community fêtes. In some ways the quieter pace of life suited him. The feeling of safety was in itself a rare pleasure. But he was still an outsider. There was an unspoken complicity between the British – the English in particular – that other races were inferior. Their ancestry had left them with a patronizing attitude, a discipline and a restraint that you had to see to believe; even the down-and-outs in Central London had more style, certainly more manners, than their New World contemporaries. Even the down-and-outs queued for Christ sakes! The English had a magnificent

capacity to ignore anything remotely disagreeable – and to them foreigners were just that. The English were...insular, of an island. And the whole goddamned island could fit inside Iowa or North Carolina!

Approaching the UK at the rate of one mile every two and a half seconds, O'Connell raised his voice to counter Concorde's continuous roar.

“We've lived here five years, Tony, and you still don't know what the place is famous for?”

Tony Valenti's sharp features remained blank. “Well, it ain't their teeth, and that's for sure.” He shrugged and offered, “Rhododendrons?”

O'Connell sighed and said disappointedly, “Magna Carta. Runnymede! The Magna Carta!”

“Oh yeah, remind me what that is again?”

“It's serious shit, Tony, trial by jury and all that political crap.”

“Yeah, I remember now.”

“Let me tell you something. We've got a lot to thank the barony for. You can't get to judges like you can get to juries.” The old man chuckled. “King fucking John didn't know he was signing us into power!” He paused before adding, “The grandchildren were telling me all about it. They're doing it at school.” He sighed reflectively and nodded. “They've got pages of the stuff, kings and queens, castles and knights and all that crap, and stickers you've got to stick on them. Those kids give me a lot of pleasure in my old age.” He turned to the scarred leathery features of Tony Valenti. “It's a shame you never had kids, Tony. Everyone should have kids.”

The old man knew only too well why Tony and Sharon had remained childless. After Sharon had been caught cheating Tony had knocked her about. The finest doctors in the world agreed that she could never have children, that the damage was too severe. O'Connell himself had tried to talk Tony into a divorce but he wouldn't have it. Valenti was besotted with his wife, children or no children. Just so long as she didn't do it again.

“It was good to see the old faces again,” O'Connell said reflectively.

Tony Valenti didn't agree. He'd been acutely embarrassed by the looks of contempt that they thought were hidden from him, and the way in which his old friends had pointedly ignored him. They'd treated him like so much shit on the sidewalk and had given him the widest possible berth. He'd been hugely relieved to get back on to the plane.

O'Connell went on, “I wish I could have stayed longer. When you get to my age whenever you leave the Big Apple you wonder if you'll ever see the place again. That's something you can promise me, Tony. If I die in the rain over there...” He indicated forward. “...I want my body freighted back to Manhattan.”

“You got it,” Tony muttered but his thoughts were racing back to the meeting they’d attended earlier in the day.

As it was with the majority of families, relationships were occasionally strained. In this respect the Americans and their relatives in Sicily and Naples and Calabria were no different. And as with most families the patriarchs – in this case they were out of the Cosa Nostra and Camorra – showed their issue tolerance and understanding. In return they expected loyalty and respect. They received both in large measure.

The Europeans had reached an agreement with the Colombian cocaine cartels by threatening to kill all their couriers. When the body count reached double figures, El Papa had agreed to talk. The link gave the Mafia exclusive rights to the two billion annual trade and their American relatives were given the job of handling it. With the increased supplies and vast fortunes tied up it was imperative that new markets were found. Mainland Europe was the obvious target, especially with the opening up of the Common Market frontiers already on the drawing board. Eventually their attention turned to the UK.

The Americans were already established in England. They’d been drawn like flies to horse shit by the wide-open gambling laws. They owned houses on the banks of the river at Runnymede. Their business in the UK still centred on gaming and its associated money laundering that cleaned enormous amounts of US and Canadian dollars. Heading up the UK end was O’Connell and he was summoned to meet the heads of the families in New York. He took Tony Valenti along for the ride, and to carry his bag.

Concluding his report to the leaders, O’Connell had said, “Under a thousand kilos were seized last year, mostly by Customs, mostly from the assholes on the Continent. They’re not even scraping the surface. The imports are basically split into four: through Liverpool, mostly from the Crescent, and that’s handled by a local gang, the Scousers, run by Vic Hannington; through the main airports, Heathrow and Gatwick, by John Bracey. A guy named Stafford Carr runs Hull. That’s another port on the other side to Liverpool. He imports through Holland, and then the freelance, mostly dropped off the top of Scotland around the islands and then picked up by the trawlers. That’s the import picture as near as you’ll get. As far as distribution is concerned the place is split between southern England run by the Chinese, and Mick McGovern who runs Scotland. Between the two is a buffer zone controlled by various smaller gangs. The Chinks deal under the protection of the main London gang, the Smiths. There’s an agreement between them that goes way back. My feeling is that in ten years or so, when the heavies move out of Hong Kong, the Chinks will want to expand. That’s the picture but it isn’t the whole story. Things are pretty unstable over there at the moment. Mick McGovern who runs Scotland is keen to expand southward. One of the guys he wants to move in on, Cuddy Hughes, is related to the Smiths. His daughter married the eldest son. The Scousers from Liverpool are making noises and threatening to join McGovern. The whole situation is likely to blow, maybe turn into a full-scale war. If it does then someone is going to have to pick up the pieces.”

From the shadows a voice of authority spoke quietly.

“The Smith’s organization is best suited for what we’ve got in mind: a nationwide distribution. We need to pressure them into ending their agreement with the Chinese. Stafford Carr can be closed down easily. His shipments from Holland will be cut immediately. The Liverpool end is more difficult. We’ll work on it. It might be that Vic Hannington takes a long vacation. For the moment we’ll live with the airports and Bracey. At the end of the day he’ll fall in line. If we open up negotiations with McGovern and make the Smiths aware of it, then they’ll come around to our way of thinking. Is that a problem?”

“No problem,” O’Connell said.

“What about you, Tony? I know it’s a long time ago but these things don’t go away.”

Tony Valenti nodded sullenly and said, “I had a run-in with the Smith’s eldest son. It was ten years ago. You all know what happened. He screwed about with my wife. I don’t hold any grievances. Business is business. I put my wife in the picture and she ain’t likely to do it again!”

Around the table the men nodded their approval.

“Business is business,” Valenti repeated. “And if you consider that the Smiths are good for us then that’s good enough for me.” He lied, of course, but he was totally convincing.

“That’s a wrap then,” the leader said softly. “Let’s get to work.”

Roaring towards Heathrow at over twice the speed of sound, Tony Valenti thought about the meeting. His expression didn’t alter as he considered the irony that after all this time his family wanted to embrace the people he hated more than anything in the world. And yet behind the insult lay a flicker of hope. It was just possible that in the ensuing struggle for control of the UK underworld – World War Three, Goddamnit – he would find his chance for retribution.

He glanced at the old man beside him.

“What is it?” O’Connell growled sleepily.

“Nothing,” Valenti murmured, “nothing at all.”

Chapter 5

Some three hundred and fifty miles north of Heathrow where the Americans had landed a fortnight before, men waited at another airport. They wandered down queues made ragged by a jumble of luggage to scrutinize the features of unsuspecting men, yet in their search they remained anonymous, hardly noticeable. Anonymity was the mark of their profession. They heard the roar of planes dropping from the low bank of dense cloud and they heard the distorted

voices heavy with Glaswegian accent resounding from the speakers, unclear in the vast ringing hall. The various sounds of engines and vehicles and nervous chatter did not distract them.

Since mid-morning they had waited. They'd watched the queues shorten and lengthen, seen the small family dramas played out, seen a man argue with his wife, seen a dozen children thumped for getting in the way, seen a lost child consoled by a couple of WPCs, seen porters making their tips and plastic cups fill every available surface, and now, under the stark fluorescent strip they watched the cleaners mopping between the groups of night-time travellers, the holiday-makers doing it on the cheap. Bedraggled, fatigued people dosed down in makeshift beds, small children lay limply in the sagging arms of their parents or lolled in their pushchairs and eyes became sore and vacant and less excited. The planes kept arriving and departing, the automatic board kept flicking and the public-address voice kept ringing.

Men waited and watched, drank coffee out of plastic cups and smoked endless cigarettes. Eventually they made a telephone call. They heard that he hadn't been found in any of the stations or depots or car-hire firms and they guessed that he'd found a lift south. All was not lost, however, for men were now watching the motorway and waiting at service stations as far south as the Midlands.

All morning a great mass of cloud had moved in off the Atlantic, drawing a darker colour across the land and, by mid-afternoon, the ceiling was low and dense, bringing forward the dusk. At first the rain was heavy, blurring the dark shadows and the arcs of light thrown from the street lamps; now it was gentle and constant, filtering into the spongy earth.

The weather suited Tommy Smith; no one was going to notice a man with his lapels pulled up to hide his face. People became anonymous in wet weather, heads down, collars up, hugging shop doorways for shelter, even the colour of clothes and hair darkened to a likeness by saturation. His problem was the scarcity of other faces. Now that the pubs and clubs were closing the weather was forcing the stragglers indoors. It wouldn't be long before he was a lonely figure on the road, easily seen and just as easily picked up. The police stopping him would be bad enough for Mick's influence had reached the northern cities, but if Mick's people got to him first then he was finished. His options were disappearing. In the next half hour or so he had to get a lift or he had to steal a car. And stealing a car to drive the length of the country all in one go was going to be pretty chancy even on such a night.

Tommy glanced again at his watch. The articulated lorry that had roared down the M6 cutting through the surface water had dropped him ten minutes earlier. Since then he'd smoked two cigarettes while studying the bright entrance of a service station from between the comparative shelter of two tightly parked container lorries. Beyond the lorry park where the two giants stood in isolation, bathed in a veil of rain and darkness so that only their massive silhouettes were visible, a row of cars were parked neatly in the white painted rectangles, shiny skins glinting in reflected light as the water droplets collected together and zigzagged in crazy patterns across them. Four powerful bikes decked in superfluous chrome, angled on their parking rests, were parked haphazardly next to the cars and immediately outside the entrance, parked in the no-parking area, an empty motorway patrol car stood with its doors unlocked.

The wind increased and swept water from the top of the containers. For a few moments Tommy was pelted with heavy drops and he was conscious of the rain seeping through to his shirt. He started from the darkness between the massive trucks just as the overnight coach from Glasgow pulled in, and he was glad to mix with the stream of passengers as they filed from the coach, stepping between the deeper pools of spitting water, to the welcome of the unflattering lights of the cafeteria.

Tommy moved along a ragged queue towards a cluttered stainless steel counter. In front of him a line of people shuffled forward to order their teas and coffees, stretching their stiff and weary bodies. The queues to the toilets grew around the edge of the room; people danced from one foot to the other. He reached the counter.

“An all-night breakfast please, and coffee.”

A woman serving half smiled, perhaps at his accent: London, born and bred. She said, “It’s an all-day breakfast, Love, but we serve it all night as well. Can you wait a minute?” She nodded toward the queue from the coach. “I’ll do your coffee.”

She was tasty, something to take the mind off the journey and the depression outside. Her spotless wraparound parted occasionally hinting that she wore no skirt beneath. There was a promise there, one that would never be kept.

He nodded silently and took his drink to a stand-up counter. The tables were full.

The queues for the toilets dwindled and those people who needed to use them again lined up again, hoping to make it before the coach driver got to his feet. In a few minutes more the vast room had all but emptied. Chairs blocked the gangways between tables full of empty crisp packets and brimming ashtrays and spills of tea and coffee. A couple of youngsters appeared and began to clear away. Coach parties: twenty quid spent between them and the place left looking like the Liverpool football supporters had held a stag night.

Tommy noticed two uniformed policemen as they moved from their corner table. For just an instant one of them looked his way and he felt certain that he’d been recognized. As their eyes locked the policeman looked away and called to the woman behind the counter, “See you, Liz.” She waved an acknowledgement at the swinging door. Tommy watched the policemen run through the rain to their car. In a moment a plume of smoke phut-phutted from the exhaust and the headlamps produced two explosions of light in the dark. The rain fizzed in the beams.

On the speakers the Bangles faded out and the Pet Shop Boys took over.

Tommy turned back from the window to check who was left in the cafeteria: half-a-dozen leather-clad bikers, three couples, one with a sleeping baby, an old man, two lorry drivers and a skinny girl who looked like she was on the game.

The waitress weaved toward him carrying his breakfast. She wiped over the surface of a table and laid down the plate.

“OK,” she asked as he sat down.

“Looks good,” he said quietly.

She paused by his table and unconsciously patted the back of her hair that was neatly clipped under a white cap. Her breasts rose against her smock. He smiled at her, almost knowingly, and she hesitated. For a moment she wondered if the term Cockney came from the word cocky.

“Cheeky sod,” she said, “Sauce?”

“No, this is fine.”

“That’s good. You’ve got enough of that already.”

He watched her make her way back to the counter. She’d coloured slightly, conscious that his eyes were on her. He concentrated on his breakfast. He hadn’t eaten anything for over twelve hours. Lunchtime seemed a lifetime ago.

A tall young man who’d arrived on his own picked up his cup and turned to find a table. He chose one close to Tommy away from the Hell’s Angels, and carefully set down his drink before pulling back a chair and easing into it.

He was gaunt and pale and his eyes were sunken under a mop of limp, brown hair. Tommy noticed the frayed cuffs and the scuffed and holed shoes. He saw the cup lifting unsteadily and the man’s glazed eyes on the fried bread that Tommy had left at the side of his plate.

“You finished with that?”

Tommy’s blue eyes narrowed before losing their steel.

“You want it?”

He nodded, “If it’s all the same to you. I ain’t eaten a thing since breakfast, kind of shaky.”

“It’s bad for you. Full of cholesterol.”

“So’s starving.” He wiped egg yoke and grease from the plate. “But people still starve.” He wiped his lips on his sleeve and gulped at his tea.

“Saw you drive in. It’s a bad night for travelling.”

“I ain’t doing it for pleasure.”

“Going south?”

“No choice.”

“Birmingham?”

“Further, maybe, if the petrol holds out.”

“Out of dough?”

The man pulled a face. “That’s right, out of luck, out of fags, and out of dough.”

“Times are hard.” Tommy tossed over a cigarette and stretched across to light it. The thin man drew smoke deeply and coughed.

“Ta,” he said and sniffed. “You’re from the south, right, London, right?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s where I’m going, if the petrol’ll get me there.”

“Car might not make it. What is it, seventy, seventy-one?”

“Two point three, seventy-three, goes like a pissing bomb. Trouble is she eats the juice.”

“You still hungry?”

“No, I’m all right now.” He drew on the cigarette again and coughed again.

“Could you use some dough?”

“What’s your game?”

“I’m looking for a lift. I’ll pay you.”

The man frowned. “What, you break down or something?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, what about the petrol?”

“I’ll get that.”

“That’ll do me then, no questions asked.”

“There’s something else.”

The thin man scratched his forehead with dirty nails, waiting for the catch.

“People are looking for me. They’re not the best. And I might have been recognised in here. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Cops?”

“No, just competition, but it could turn nasty. If you went to your car, made to pull out then stop at the entrance, I’ll hop in and off we go. It’s got to be worth a ton if you get us to London.”

The man frowned, “One hundred pound?”

Tommy remained expressionless. He lit another cigarette.

“A hundred quid,” the other repeated, this time as a statement. “I don’t need trouble but I can’t turn that away. All right, I’ll get you there.” He looked up suspiciously. “Half now, so I know you ain’t going to leg it. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Tommy Smith.”

“The footballer,” he nodded, “Liverpool, right?”

“Leave it out. I’m not that bleedin’ old!”

“Give us another fag then, and tell me what to do.”

“How much petrol have you got in the tank?”

“About two and a half gallons, maybe three.”

“Stone the crows! That won’t get us half way to Brum never mind the Smoke.” He reached for his wallet. “Here, here’s a score. Fill her up. What about oil and water?”

“She’s all right. I checked her this morning.”

“OK. You know what to do?”

The other nodded. “Right, my name’s Roy Alexander.”

“I’ll buy some more fags and a couple of rolls for you. When I see you outside the door I’ll make a move.”

He counted out five tens and added them to the twenty. “I’ll give you the rest when we reach the Smoke.”

“Right,” Roy said. He took the money and stood up. “Be ready then,” he said excitedly. He reached the door before he stopped and called back, “Cheese and tomato.”

The others in the room looked his way.

“The rolls,” he grinned, “make them cheese and tomato.”

“Right,” Tommy nodded anxiously. He could have done without the advertising. He watched the car splutter into life and the wipers arcing across the glistening windshield. The headlamps, one dimmed, glared as the car moved off toward the garage. Tommy moved to the counter and paid for his meal. He bought the rolls and cigarettes and stuffed them into his leather pocket. He left the shrapnel out of a tenner on the counter.

“Come again,” Liz said and gave him a smile she usually reserved for her drivers.

“I’d like to,” he said and returned the knowing glance that meant nothing at all.

“Cheeky sod,” she said.

Chapter 6

Starting at Carlisle the M6 cut a deep concrete groove through the Lake District and Forest of Bowland and snaked its way through the counties of Cumbria, Lancashire and Cheshire, slicing through the buffer zone of the divide and, on it, the dipped headlamps flashed in both directions boring through the incessant wall of rain. Bonnets and exhausts steamed, engines rattled and tyres whined as they sent up curtains of spray.

Roy Alexander was a good driver, alert, steady and fast. He unwrapped one of the rolls from its cellophane cover while his other hand remained firmly on the wheel. He kept to a steady sixty and cruised twenty yards behind a BOC tanker so that the spray fell before he was on it. The windshield-wipers worked overtime against the flood. Tomato juice full of seed trickled down his chin and he wiped it on his sleeve.

“Don’t know if anyone’s following or not,” he said with his mouth full. He studied the flashing lights in the mirror.

“Just concentrate on the road,” Tommy muttered.

“Been up here long?”

“Just a couple of days.”

“Come by train then, eh?”

“No, I motored up on Sunday. I had to leave it.” The answer came with the flare of a cigarette lighter. “You want one of these?”

Roy finished his roll and took the cigarette. He kept his eyes on the road as he bent to receive a light.

“Accident or busted down?”

“Neither.”

Roy’s disappointment was obvious even in the dark. After a moment he said, “Well, it’s none of my business. If you don’t want to talk about it, fair enough. Should know what we’re up against, though. If we’re being followed, I should know about it, that’s all.”

Tommy sighed and relented, “My old man’s got business interests up north. I’ve been up there to sort things. He got ill earlier in the week and yesterday they got wind of it, that he was rushed into hospital. With him out of action they’re trying to opt out of the deal.”

“Business troubles! When you said about getting hurt I thought you meant like, really hurt.”

Tommy chuckled but there was little humour about it. He said, “These Scottish bleeders have been known to cut up rough. They take their business seriously.”

“What kind of business you in?”

“Entertainments mostly, consumer goods and entertainment.”

“Luxuries! Ain’t much call for luxuries up this way, not any more. That’s why I’m going south. Got to. No choice.”

“How long have you been out of work?”

“Three years now. Got a wife and kids, two kids. Never thought anyone would go hungry in this country. Didn’t think they allowed it. This month we’ve been hungry. The kids are starting to get ill ‘cos of it. They get school meals on the social but they’re cutting them back and, anyway, they don’t help during the school hols. I’ve already cut everything out till there ain’t no more to cut. And you have to choose between hot water and food. What we had before and what we had to sell kept us going along with the handouts. But it’s been over a year and what we had before is all gone now so I got nothing else to sell. And things are wearing out, all together it seems. I know you don’t have to have a washing machine or a fridge, but Christ, things ain’t geared up to not having them. Not today. Now the heating in the house is bugged and I need a new tank. The bastards ain’t going to give me one either. They say the insurance should cover it and the insurance people say it don’t. Who the hell do you fight? To be honest with you, I’m all out of fight.”

“You could sell up.”

“You’re joking, right? There’s millions in the same boat as me. Don’t tell me you believe these bleeding figures on *out of work*? They talked us into buying, right? And then they took away our jobs.”

“Never given it much thought. Never did believe anything the politicians said.”

“House prices have hit rock bottom up here. If I sold out now I’d owe more on it than I’d get. And where the hell am I going to put the family? Council don’t want to know. They got people camping on their doorsteps. Not only that, they’d have the bleeding kids off you soon as look at you. We’ve got no rights today, nothing. The right to starve, that’s all. I’ve got to get a job. That’s why I’m travelling. There’s work down south. Anyway, you’ve got your own problems. Your old man’s in hospital.”

He sensed Tommy’s nod.

“Hope it’s not serious. I remember losing my old man about five years ago. Heart attack. Went over in the middle of Sainsbury’s. We all said it was the bloody cost of food that caused it, the bloody government taking us into the Common Market. What a bleeding con job that was. Never went shopping, my old man. Mum always did all that. But she was a bugger. Moaned and groaned after him non-stop to give her more housekeeping, said he hadn’t got a clue how much she spent on the weekly shop. So this day, Saturday it was, ‘cos he was going on from there to see Carlisle play Oldham, she went off to buy some cheese – he liked his old cheese on toast in an evening – and left him looking at the meat counter. When she came back there was a crowd there and he was on the floor. Went over just like that. One minute himself, the next gone. I’m glad he ain’t alive today to see us like this, though. He would have gone spare thinking of my girl going out with great holes in her shoes. I think that would have killed him anyway!”

The next few minutes were coated in silence. The rain was easing a little and through it the orange glow of village streetlights cut through the darkness.

“People in work ain’t got a clue how we’re living. That’s the trouble. The highlight of the week is the *TV Times* coming out on a Wednesday. Our TV’s busted now and I think that’s what broke the back of it. My old girl’s been pretty good. She’s been cleaning and taking in washing and she ain’t moaned but when that TV busted she just sat there and cried. She put up with the shit ‘cos I can’t afford the decorating, and she put up with the hand-me-downs and not going no place but when that screen went dead she folded up. It was then I decided to get on my bike. I left her with a few quid, enough for a week, put a tenner in the tank and took off. I’ll send this hundred quid to her all right, and that’ll cheer her up. By Christ it will! I’ll send it first post tomorrow. I’d like to see her face, mind. Got a good mind to drop you off then turn around and hand it to her personally, so I can see her.”

“Put it in the post, my son. You’ll be all right.”

Roy felt warmed by the conversation, lifted from his isolation. “I hope you’re right, mister, ‘cos I’m running out of ideas and I never had many to start with.”

The road ahead began its sweep between the cities of Manchester and Liverpool. The tanker blinked and moved across to the slip road and Roy edged the Victor slowly up to the back of a container lorry. Spray splattered the windshield, fanning off the giant square of rippling canvas in front. He eased back slightly and considered overtaking, instinctively glancing in his mirror. Two pools of light, full beam, exploded in the glass and slid to the right as the car behind accelerated to overtake. Roy pulled back into his own lane and glanced sideways as the dark sinister shape of a Jaguar slipped by. From the passenger seat a blurred face turned their way.

Roy grunted, "That him?"

"Could be. Something's caught his eye, or maybe he just fancies you."

Roy tightened his grip on the wheel and eased into the fast lane again and watched the tail-lights of the Jaguar growing dimmer until they vanished into the curtain of rain. He slipped back behind the shelter of the lorry.

"Maybe we're just getting paranoid."

Tommy wasn't so sure. He sat forward, suddenly alert. He muttered, "It was better to have him behind. While he's up front he could lay something on."

"Glad I'm not in the entertainment business," Roy said. Without understanding it he sensed the danger. "There's another exit coming up. Shall I take it?"

"No. If we tuck up behind him he'll have less chance."

"They cut up rough in the boardrooms then?"

Tommy grinned.

"Course, I always knew there was no difference between the big businessman and the criminal. Come to think of it, the politicians too. That much stands to reason. They're the criminals because they have the power to do something about it and they don't. But what can you do? When the kids are starving you got to do something, right? Don't let the bastards get you down, right? But there are too many bastards in this country now; everyone's looking after number one. How do you fight that?"

"Listen," Tommy began quietly. "Forget the propaganda; virtue never was a step up to heaven's door and suffering in silence never did anyone any good." More forcefully he went on, "I'll tell you how you do it, my son. You make a noise and you keep making it till someone listens. It's the only thing anyone understands. My kids aren't starving. I haven't got any kids. But if I did and they were because some official bastard wanted it that way, then I'd climb over their counters and tear their heads off!"

"I believe you. But some of us ain't strong enough to do that."

“When you get mad enough you’ll do it.”

“Maybe you’re right, maybe not.”

“Listen, there’s trouble all over. There’s always going to be someone who wants your share and there’s only one thing to do. You fight back. You hurt the bastard so much that he’ll never come back again. You make him realize that if he even thinks about upsetting you he’s never going to look the same again. And if you can make him really believe that, you’d be surprised at how accommodating he suddenly gets.”

“Does that include the police?”

“The filth? Yeah, kozzers included, even the Queen of England if she comes round to threaten my family. I don’t condone anyone getting hurt that doesn’t deserve it. But some people are born different, they want to make trouble, they want what’s yours.”

“I hear it but I don’t like it. I ain’t into violence and I don’t want my kids to be. I’d sooner walk away from trouble. There’s got to be some other way.”

“Let me know when you find it.”

The night grew darker and the air in the car became hot and dry. Altrincham, Crewe, Stoke, Stafford, came and went, the great sprawling metropolis of the Midlands, Birmingham, was negotiated and that was the M6. They skirted Coventry and Rugby and joined the M1 and the new signs flashed Northampton and London.

The small hours crept by, the unreal time when noises seemed duller and moves made in slow motion. The traffic had dwindled and most of it consisted of lorries and coaches. The speed limits became irrelevant and plumes of spray hung behind the roaring wheels. Out of the eastern sky a pale ghost of iron-grey cloud touched the darkness.

“Maybe he’s packed it in,” Roy said as he fought for concentration and accelerated past another flapping canvas. His passenger stirred. The farther south they had come the safer Tommy felt. He’d considered the possibilities a dozen times.

If Mad Mick had been going to hit them then he would do so on the M6 and when that hadn’t happened it would be before Northampton, and then Newport Pagnall, and now it had to be before Luton. Even Mad Mick wouldn’t venture to the steps of London. That meant that at some stage in the next few minutes the move would be made. He lit two cigarettes and passed one over. Roy sensed the sudden alertness in his passenger and gripped the wheel tighter. His body coiled slightly, expectantly.

“OK, I’m ready!”

Tommy nodded.

They passed the slips to Bedford and then Dunstable, examining every vehicle they overtook. The sky was fingered with grey and without them realizing it the surroundings had picked up a monotone form. The pale light intensified and things found their drab colour. The low cloud stretched in every direction. Luton went by and for the first time in over twelve hours, since the moment he had watched the news on the television in his hotel bedroom, Tommy allowed himself a moment's relaxation. For some reason Mad Mick had called off his men. The exits for St Albans and Watford were quiet.

"I'd like to get to see the studios," Roy said. "See them making the films, eh? Maybe get some work there. That would be something." He'd seen the Elstree sign. He glanced at Tommy and winked. "We made it. You're home. Told you she'd make it. Goes like a pissing rocket, don't she?" He rubbed his neck and swallowed sorely. "I could murder a cuppa."

"You're right, my son. You've done well. Take the next slip. There's a place we can get a drink and a brush-up just off Apex."

"I never had any doubt that she'd make it. She might rattle a bit, some of the body falls off sometimes, but she's a fighter. She'll give you everything she's got. She's one of the greatest cars ever made." A large sign approached indicating Mill Hill and Edgware. Roy sat up straighter. "I get quiet excited at seeing London, like a kid."

"You've been before?"

"Came down for a weekend when I was twelve. We came by coach. Saw the Palace and the Planetarium."

Tommy grunted his disapproval. "They say the world's getting smaller but for some people it isn't. You can fly to New York in the time it's taken to drive from Manchester and you've never even seen the Smoke."

"Did the Tower, saw the jewels."

"Well, that's all right then." Tommy shook his head. "I mean, even I haven't seen the jewels!"

Something hit the windshield. Crystals of glass sprayed in with a sudden rush of cold air and water. The remaining screen milked in a crazy jigsaw and then broke into a thousand pieces that thudded into the car. Wind and rain lashed in and almost lifted the car. Instinctively Roy's foot was on the brake; the wheels screamed, the car slewed sideways and moved inexorably toward the cavernous underside and monstrous wheels of a huge articulated lorry. The nearside rear window shattered and Roy heard something crashing about his head. He watched horrified as the bonnet ripped open and sparks flew towards him. A burning sensation swept down his side and his gasp for breath left him doubled in agony. His left arm, limp and useless, dropped from the wheel, and the car lurched closer to the truck. The rear end touched and the kickback sent the Victor spinning. It turned full circle behind the lorry and rumbled and tore at the metal barrier dividing north and south. Lorries and coaches swerved to miss them, sparks flew and tyres

screached. Tommy released his belt and grabbed hold of the wheel. He screamed above the roar of noise.

“Get her over! Don’t stop!”

Roy understood and ran the car on to the hard shoulder. He kept his head low to keep the rain from blinding him.

“Keep her going,” Tommy shouted. “There’s a turn about a hundred yards ahead.”

The Victor didn’t make it. The rear wheel buckled and they ran on the rim. The shaking bonnet bent upward at a crazy angle and threatened to fly off altogether. They ground to a halt twenty yards short of the slip road. Vehicles thudded past.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Tommy shouted. “Are you all right?” He saw the red stain spreading out on Roy’s shirt and realised it was a stupid question.

“I don’t know. I’m shaking like a leaf. I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Save it till later. That wasn’t a stone that hit us back there. We’ve got to leg it.”

He opened the door, stepped out on to the wet surface and peered up the road between the oncoming vehicles with their pale orange headlamps bearing down, at the deep ridges cut into the barrier. He ran around the front of the car and caught hold of Roy as he staggered from his seat. A streak of blood trickled from Roy’s hairline and thinned with the rain to run quickly down the side of his face. Tommy pulled Roy’s jacket together and buttoned it over the deep red flood at his waist.

“I can’t stand up. I can’t!” Roy’s face contorted and his legs buckled. Tommy helped him back to the seat. Roy gasped again and let out a long groan.

“Roy, I’ve got to go. The filth will be here any second. I’ll look you up. You haven’t seen me. You haven’t seen a thing, understand?”

Roy looked up helplessly. He trembled. His eyes began to slip.

“I’ll make it up to you. I’ll find you and you’ll be all right.”

In the distance a siren wailed above the general clatter of traffic, and blue light flashed through the spray.

Tommy glanced down again and saw that unconsciousness had relaxed Roy’s features. He pulled up his coat collar and began to run, splashing through the dancing puddles, across the oil stains that had created their own palettes, then he was turning his back on the rush of traffic and he was racing along the darker surface of the slip road toward a built-up area where cars were parked end to end on either side, where milk floats clinked and postmen wandered.

He found the narrow alley he was looking for and walked between the walls of brick and concrete. He sidestepped an overflowing gutter and fiddled with the rusty latch on a battered green gate. Beyond, across a tiny square of cracked concrete, he recognized a red back door and banged it until his fist hurt. He smacked on the mottled glass until lights were switched on and the sound of muffled voices came from within. Bolts were thrown back and the door opened and he looked into the astonished face of a heavy set man dressed in blue-striped pyjama bottoms and a white string vest who said, "Jesus!"

The man reached out quickly and helped Tommy into the kitchen. The door slammed shut. The wind increased in strength and drew more rain from the low cloud and sent it forcefully up the alley, pelting and rattling the green gate, lifting it over the fencing in a curved spray to collect and run down the glass of the back door, collecting the light from within as it zigzagged its way southward.

Chapter 7

The post-war three-bedroom terrace was built to a similar format across the length of the country. The back door led to the kitchen that in turn led to the hallway and the stairs to the bathroom and bedrooms. When Tommy awoke it was in the curtained back bedroom. His clothes were piled neatly on a single chair and his watch faced him from a small MFI bedside locker. It was ten o'clock. He could hear the hum of Simply Red on Radio One and the playful chattering of sparrows on the outside guttering. He swept back the duvet and examined a dark bruising that began on his ribs and swept down beneath the elastic of his shorts. He left open the bathroom door while he used the pan and sluiced his head in a basin of cold water. He borrowed one of three toothbrushes upended in a plastic beaker and cleaned his teeth then considered using the razor but decided against it. There were some things you didn't borrow. Not today in the age of AIDS and Aquarius. He walked back into the bedroom and sat on the bed while he fastened his watch. Shadow filled the doorway and he glanced up. A woman stood framed in the light from the landing, arms folded, shoulder leant against the doorframe, the questions on her face wanting some answers.

"You've been on the radio. Least, I'm guessing it was you. A shoot-out on the M1, some guy full of holes, coppers all over the shop."

"Don't know what you're on about, girl."

"You bleedin' well do!"

She was in her mid-twenties, darkly tanned, half-Middle-Eastern with large black eyes and shiny-cropped hair. There was a touch of rouge on her cheeks. Or was it anger?

"Where's Pete?"

“He’s gone to bleedin’ work, where do you think?”

It was anger, he decided.

“And the boy?”

“Round next door. I made out I wasn’t feeling well. And that wasn’t a lie, seeing you here!” She moved into the room and drew back a pair of thin blue curtains. “I’ll go and make a drink. I want you out of here by lunchtime.” He watched her walk back across the room and noticed the trim figure working beneath her pencil-line black skirt. Suddenly she stopped and turned and looked back from the landing through the open door.

“Don’t you get any ideas, Tommy Smith! You’re getting coffee and naff all else!”

Tommy raised his hands in mock surrender and grinned. He lay back on the bed and tried to recall what had happened. He remembered the strong arms of Peter Hough helping him to the couch and then a phone call, but that was all.

A few moments later she returned with a mug of sweet coffee. He sipped it and watched her move back to the window to gaze out at the wet tiled rooftops and the chimney-stacks throwing up white strands of smoke from the smokeless fuel.

Against the light her blouse became transparent and through it he could see the curve of her breast.

“Who did he phone last night?”

“Last night? It wasn’t bleedin’ last night. It was five o’clock this morning. He was going to call your brother but he couldn’t get through. I don’t know what the neighbours are going to think with you banging on the door at that time.”

“Sod the neighbours. Come and sit over here.”

“Piss off Tommy,” she said and continued to gaze from the window.

“That’s nice.”

She half turned toward him and her eyes narrowed fractionally. “You’re trouble, Tommy. You always were. You’re like a magnet and bother is drawn to you. You can handle it most of the time, but other people can’t and they get hurt. Now you might care or you might not care about other people but it makes no difference ‘cos they still get hurt whether you do or not. Pete wanted to stay and help and get involved like a few years ago but I don’t want you near him. That’s why he’s gone to work. And when he comes home tonight he won’t even ask what happened, ‘cos nothing happened. You were never here.” She hesitated and drew a deep breath. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Tommy? The past is gone. It never happened. You shouldn’t have come. I wish you hadn’t. Pete’s trying to make a go of it, and he’s trying hard for

the sake of the kid. He ain't got your brains and if he follows you he'll end up inside again. That's all I've got to say to you, Tommy Smith. Next time you get hurt and you walk past this house, I want you to keep walking. For you and your family it doesn't exist!"

He nodded and gulped at his coffee. His eyes had dulled at the rebuke. He leant across to the chair and fished in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. He lit one and settled back and watched a jet of smoke stream up to the artex ceiling. She noticed the sudden flicker of his eyes, the sudden steely dullness that came down like an inner lid as the sparkle went out, and she shrank back immediately. Her recoil could not have been more noticeable had she stepped on something evil and repulsive. The fear drained her face of colour and her hand half hid her features as she pinched her quivering lower lip. She knew that she'd overstepped the mark. One word from him and she'd be back on the meat rack at King's Cross. One word from him and her efforts over the past few years would count for nothing, her plans for the family totally irrelevant. She owed Tommy and his family and she knew that the debt could never be repaid. You gave them whatever they asked for; offer them anything less and you offended them. They were not the sort of people to take for granted or threaten or voice an opinion about and now, after all this time, she'd allowed her temper to get the better of her self-preservation. The thought and her fear showed on her face.

Tommy turned his head on the pillow and looked at her, still mildly embarrassed.

"I didn't mean all that, Tommy," she said sheepishly, turning toward him. She looked at the floor, refusing to meet his gaze, knowing the cruelty she would find there.

"Leave it out, girl. You meant it all right. Forget it."

She glanced up, surprised.

"You won't tell Pete what I said?"

He smiled. "Not a word."

She nodded briefly while the relief softened her features.

"Well, shall I get in with you?"

"No, you do what you want to do."

"I want to, Tommy, but if I got the choice then I won't."

He grinned. "Once upon a time you were a slag, you know that? Now you're a lady. If you and the kid ever need for anything, just let me know."

"Is Pete included?"

“Can’t be, can he? He left the firm. Once you leave, if you’re allowed to, then you lose all fringe benefits.”

“I left.”

“No you didn’t. You’re just on a temporary leave of absence. Call it extended maternity leave.”

She looked at him thoughtfully, considering the implications, and they didn’t worry her.

“You’re not like the others.”

“A lot of people say that. You can’t blame me for what other people think.”

“I don’t want the kid hurt, that’s all. I want everything for him.”

“Is he Pete’s?”

A moment’s hesitation destroyed the possibility of a lie. “He looks like your older brother but Pete thinks he’s the spitting image of his dad.”

“We might as well go along with that then.”

“I think so,” she said softly.

He finished his cigarette and reached for his clothes.

“It’s time I was on my way.”

“I hope you old man’s all right.”

“It’s got around then?”

“It’s been in the paper. An emergency operation, it said. They called him a property tycoon with links to the underworld.”

“Stone the crows! It sounds like we’ve been advertising.”

“Does it mean a lot of trouble?”

“We could do without it.” He shrugged and added, “A bit of bother, that’s all.”

She walked across to him and straightened his collar and looked into his bloodshot eyes. She said quietly, “If it had been you I wouldn’t have left.”

“If it had been me I wouldn’t have let you.”

She followed him from the room, across the landing and down the stairs.

“I want to make a quick call,” he said.

She pointed into the living room.

He found a small neatly furnished room: a leather three-piece, a wall unit housing a shelf of books, another of photographs of a young child, a drinks unit, a television and video, a stacked music centre, pale grey wall-to-wall and Dralon curtains over uPVC double glazing, the smell of lemon-scented polish and a gas fire. It was a hideaway and he felt like a trespasser. He punched six digits into the phone and listened to three rings before he heard a familiar voice. While he spoke he looked across at the girl and although his thoughts were on the call his eyes lingered on every curve.

“Dave? It’s me. I’m home. Be about thirty minutes. How is he?”

For a few seconds he listened and then he replaced the handset.

She asked, “Is he all right?”

He shrugged. “They’re seeing the consultant later.”

She nodded. At the door he brushed her painted lips. They were surprisingly cold. It was a platonic kiss that reminded him of a thousand broken promises.

“Bye, Denise,” he said, still tasting her, and moved into the yard. She’d closed the back door before he’d even stepped across the puddles to the gate.

The day was brighter. The rain had stopped and the cloud had become feathery and broken. He stepped into the alley and closed the gate behind him, conscious of the dripping surroundings, the overflow snout still trickling and the ground beneath washed clean and glistening. The air was chilled and fresh and tinged with the smell of wet grass and the fumes of the city. He was home. The thought added a spring to his youthful step.

To the left of the darkened alley entrance a navy-blue Lada stood idling on freshly painted, double yellow lines. It idled on the fast side and it rattled as Ladas do, phut-phutting gently from its nervous exhaust. Its square shape reminded passers-by of a fifties style. The driver they saw, with his collar pulled up, the roll-up suspended from his lips, his face a mask of concentration, was instantly forgettable, nondescript, and the passenger in the back seat was hardly noticeable either, perhaps because anonymity was his trademark and, as with the driver, a necessary part of his profession.

Chapter 8

Theca, the Star of the Veldt, glanced up expectantly as her elder brother walked in from the entrance hall. Her features were classically English, her pale skin emphasized by her dark hair. Even though she was tired and drawn, her loveliness was still evident.

“It was Tommy,” he said quietly and saw the relief in her brownflecked eyes.

Every time the telephone rang it was a heart-stopping moment. The door was purposefully closed on it, so that the conversation was private. When the door opened again the same troubled questions were written in the strained eyes.

“He’s back. He’ll be here in half-an-hour.”

At Theca’s side at the dining table his mother said, “Thank God for that, at least.” She lifted her china cup from its saucer and fought to control its shake. Her eyes were raw and beneath them the darkness spread out like deep bruises. “Where is he?”

“Over in Mill Hill. He’s taking a cab.”

“What’s he doing over there?” Worry made her voice quiver. She shook her head. “Did he sound upset?”

Dave said gently, “I said we’d explain everything when he got here.” He was a big man of thirty-nine, balding prematurely, fighting a weight problem, but losing. His eyes, brown and large, were dulled and sore through lack of sleep. As he sat down heavily at the table he glanced across at his sister as if to share some secret message. Theca saw it and looked at her mother. Sally was stunned like the rest of them, her face fraught and pale. In the last two days she seemed to have aged ten years. She was too wise not to appreciate what was going on – the knowing glances, the lowered voices and the door closing on the telephone calls – but she was too tired to argue.

She finished her tea and moved from the table.

“I’ll go and get ready. When Tommy comes in I’ll make some lunch and then we’ll go. What time is it now?”

“It’s ten to twelve. We’ve still got two hours!” Theca shrugged, irritated by her mother’s fussing.

Sally turned to her son. “David, I want to call in at the shops on the way. I need some things for your father.”

“Can’t you send someone? Where’s Lucia?”

“She’s gone home for the holidays.”

Dave shook his head at his own forgetfulness. Lucia always took her holidays to coincide with those of the family. Eventually he said, “I’ve got people sitting outside doing nothing.”

“No, that won’t do at all.”

“I’ll go and get the shopping now,” Theca said, jumping at the opportunity to get away for a while. “Write a list.” She turned to Dave. “When Tommy gets here you can tell him what’s happening.”

“Sounds OK,” Dave said, hiding his unease. He left the two women busily making a list and went back into the hall. He dialled a number and spoke quietly into the handset.

“Tommy’s due back. Look out for him. Theca’s going to do some shopping. She’ll use the Mini. Stay with her.” He hung up as Theca appeared and opened the cupboard for her jacket. As she reached up he noticed her willowy figure. She’d always been on the slim side but just lately the weight had fallen off her.

“I’ll call in and see Ted on the way back,” she said and then quietly added, “I think we should have someone in to help out, just for the time being, particularly since Lucia’s away for the next two weeks.” Lucia was the live-in housekeeper, a young woman from St Michelle in northern France. She’d been looking after the family for five years and during that time had become more than an employee. She was the granddaughter of one of her father’s old friends, a woman named Nathalie Mazeau he’d met during the war. Lucia had arrived in order to improve her English and she had stayed, simple as that, taken over the running of the house and become part of the family. Their parents also employed a daily cleaner and a gardener but Theca was suggesting something else, perhaps even more than a temporary replacement for Lucia.

“I don’t know, Sis. It keeps her occupied. I don’t think we should change things at the moment. In any case, once Lucia gets wind of what has happened she’ll probably catch the next flight back.”

Theca saw his point and shrugged. She opened the front door.

“There’ll be two guys behind you.”

“Why?” She turned sharply.

“Because they do what I tell them to do. Until we know what’s happening out there we’ve got to play it safe.”

“I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“That’s beside the point. You’re a Smith. Start acting like one. Until things are sorted we’ve got to watch ourselves.”

“I don’t like it, Dave. I don’t like to be followed. I don’t trust them and they make me nervous.”

“You won’t even know they’re there. Now go on, get the shopping.”

She slammed the door. Dave shook his head and smiled. In the kitchen Sally asked, "What was that about?"

"You know the Star, Ma. She's got a temper at the best of times but at the moment she's a bit emotional, like the rest of us. She flared up at the thought of a couple of minders."

Sally nodded, understanding more than Dave knew about her daughter's dilemma. The women in the family were not involved in the business and when it threatened their freedom, they felt hostility towards it.

"She thinks you ought to have someone in to help out, until Lucia gets back."

Sally tried a smile but it wasn't convincing. "No, that wouldn't do and I can manage perfectly well."

"I know, Mum." Dave reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. "Go and get ready. I'll put the kettle on. Tommy will want a drink when he gets in."

As he filled the kettle he watched his mother walk stiffly from the kitchen past a calendar hanging by the door. It showed the month of May 1986 and the date of Friday 23rd was circled in black ink, marked because his parents were supposed to be flying out to their villa in Portugal for a couple of weeks in the sun. They generally managed a couple of weeks in May as well as the whole of August when they took the grandchildren and Lucia with them. Dave sighed at the irony. The pressure of business, particularly the noises of hostility emanating from the north, had weighed heavily on his father and he'd needed some heavy persuading not to postpone the trip.

Dave heard the door open and saw Tommy sneaking through the lobby. His clothes looked as though he'd slept in them and a watermark on his blue collar had dried to a white ring. Stubble on his chin darkened his tanned features and his bloodshot eyes lent a sparkle to the steely blue. He had the same colouring and characteristics as his mother. Both Dave and the Star of the Veldt took after their father.

Tommy's grin was reflex, a sigh of relief at being home and seeing a face that he could trust.

"Where's Ma?" he whispered.

"Upstairs," Dave said quietly. "Christ, you look rough."

He moved to pour some tea. Tommy sat down.

"I could've done without the advertising. I had some bother getting back."

Dave nodded over the steaming teapot. He replaced the china lid.

"I guessed as much. I saw the news and put two and two together. I thought about sending you an escort but you'd already left the hotel."

“I couldn’t hang around,” Tommy said seriously. “They knew where I was staying. As soon as I heard it on the one o’clock I was out of there. I had to leave the motor. Mick had his soldiers on the street and I wasn’t waiting to see if they were taking prisoners. They were coming in the front door as I left through the back. I couldn’t ring you from the hotel!”

Hotel billing systems automatically logged outgoing calls and there was no way Tommy wanted his whereabouts recorded.

“You sure they were Mick’s people?”

“Who else knew I was up there?”

Dave pulled a face. His brother had a point but he was also inexperienced. Dave was wise enough to know that few people could be trusted. The family had a lot of enemies that smiled like the best of friends. A whisper in the right ear could prove more deadly than a frontal assault.

“What happened?”

“I thought we’d made it.” He sipped his tea gratefully then pulled a face and reached for the sugar bowl. “Just relaxing when they hit us coming off the A41. I thought the bleedin’ Chernobyl had gone off again. The geezer giving me a ride took one in the side. It looked bad.”

“How the hell did they find you?” He didn’t spell it out but a veiled criticism that Tommy had been followed from the hotel was left hanging.

Tommy shook his head. “Just a guess but there was a kozzer at the service station where I picked up the lift – on the M6. I think he recognized me.”

“Bastards! That’s as good as a direct line to Mick. He’s got the motorway coppers up there totally buttoned up. They give his shipments from Liverpool a fucking escort!”

“That’s what I thought. Anyway, I ended up at Hough’s gaff overnight.”

Dave frowned, “Pete Hough?”

Tommy nodded.

“He’s not one of us, Tommy.”

“I had no choice. Anyway, I got away with it.”

“Was Denise there?”

“Yes.” Tommy laughed in order to cover his thoughts but eye contact that went on a moment too long gave the game away. He added, “She kicked me out this morning. But I still got a right earache.”

Dave shrugged his suspicion aside and said, "It was still dangerous. You should have come home."

"At the time I could hardly stand up and the filth was all over the shop."

"What happened?"

"Shotguns. They hit us four or five times. Messed up the paint work good and proper."

"Christ! It sounds like you were lucky. But so far south! It's a bit fucking naughty."

"It doesn't make a lot of sense, though."

"Go on?"

"Think about it. Mick wouldn't have made a mistake. It's not his style at all. And with a set-up like that he couldn't have been certain."

"What then?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't add up." Tommy lit a cigarette and blew smoke out with the question, "How's Pop. Is he safe?"

Dave's grunt was almost contemptuous. "You know he was bad at the wedding?"

Tommy nodded, remembering it well. His father had looked ill and both he and his mother had left the reception early, immediately after the firework display.

"He went to The Tower on Monday still moaning about his gut. His foot was playing up too. He wouldn't see Noddy and spent Tuesday morning in bed with Mum fussing around him." Dave paused while his younger brother put out his barely touched cigarette. "Tuesday afternoon he started throwing up. Theca came round, took one look and called Noddy. From the smell of it she guessed it came from the lower gut. Noddy took a look and said hospital. Teddy was over at the Castle so Theca drove Pop to the hospital herself. Panic isn't the word. She rang Barry and he got hold of me. It was theatre that same night, no messing. The girls were in one hell of a state. It was questionable whether he was going to pull through the operation. They didn't think they'd see him again." Dave waved a dismissive hand. "Anyway, some bastard over there squealed to the press and the next thing we knew the BBC had set up camp. That's when your trouble started. By the time I phoned, you'd already legged it. We went up last night but he was still shaky. I don't know whether he recognized us. He's got tubes coming out of his arms and a catheter or something stuck in him but they've eased the blockage. That's all they'd tell us. We're seeing the consultant at two."

"How's Ma taking it?"

"Hard, as you'd expect. Theca stayed here last night."

“What about the hospital? Is he safe?”

“Don’t talk to me about that. It’s a bloody madhouse. They’ve got him in an open ward. He wouldn’t hear of going private. You know him and the NHS. He wouldn’t even let me get him a private room. I’ll have another go today but I know the answer before I start.”

“You’ve got people in there?”

“Christ yes. Mind you, it’s probably not necessary. Half the Yard is camped out over there.” Dave grinned. “Still, you should see our guys. They’re going to kill some poor sod with a trolley before long.”

For a few moments Tommy considered all that he’d heard then he glanced up and said, “They’re supposed to be flying out today. It’s a shame this didn’t wait until next month.”

“I know what you mean, but just think if it had happened next week with him in the middle of Portugal.”

They heard the sound of a light step and turned to see Sally. Tommy was on his feet immediately and went into the kitchen to hug her. She seemed small and fragile against him.

“Oh, Tommy,” she sighed and pressed the side of her face against his chest. She shook away her emotion and said, “Some of your clothes are upstairs. You’d better go and change. And shave. You can’t turn up at the hospital looking like that. You should have let us know where you were.”

Tommy released her.

“David has told you everything? I’ll make some sandwiches. You go and change now. We haven’t got long. Isn’t the Star back yet?”

Dave called in from the dining room, “She’s calling in to see Ted.”

“Oh yes,” Sally’s thoughts were elsewhere: in the hospital, in the past, in the fearsome future. She turned to the worktop and began on the sandwiches.

They were almost ready and Sally was just adding garnish when the door opened and Theca led Ted into the kitchen. She lifted a bulging Marks and Spencer bag on to the side.

“Hello love; hello Teddy.” Even as she spoke Sally barely glanced up. “Did you get everything?”

Theca nodded and began to unpack. Ted kissed Sally’s cheek and hugged her quickly, silently, before joining the brothers in the dining room.

“All right, Teddy,” Dave said. It was a greeting, not a question.

Ted nodded and turned to Tommy, “How did you make out?”

Tommy said quietly, “I’m in one piece, but lucky. Explain later.”

Ted glanced through the open door at the women busily unpacking the shopping. His curiosity would have to wait. He was shorter than the brothers and carried much less weight. He was forty, greying, and had about him a studious look accentuated by silver-rimmed spectacles positioned slightly low on his nose. He wore a dark-blue pinstripe with a strip of yellow handkerchief above his top pocket.

Sally carried in the sandwiches and fresh tea.

“Did the children get to school all right?” She asked.

“No problem,” Ted said. “Jean came in early to look after them.”

“Will they let us see Dad this afternoon?” Tommy asked.

Dave frowned for a moment and then smiled at his younger brother. He said, “They’ll let us do anything we like.”

Ted chuckled.

Sally’s glance was sharp. She’d heard it before, from her husband, but always in jest. He didn’t really believe it. Yet there was an intrinsic truth in what her eldest son had said. They did get their way and people fell over themselves to accommodate them. She knew enough about the business to know that it wasn’t out of love or kindness. It was more out of fear and respect. Perhaps the two were related. Now that her husband lay seriously ill some of that respect would disappear and in its place would grow hostility and revenge. Keeping her family safe until the crisis was over was not going to be easy and the responsibility rested on David’s shoulders. She was not sure whether he was ready for it. She looked at her eldest son and saw her husband and when he spoke she heard her husband.

“Are we ready then?” she heard and watched Dave lead the way. “Theca, you better take your motor. Ma and Tommy can come with me.”

Sally brushed a hair from her suit jacket and followed the others into the kitchen.

Although the house would be empty, they didn’t lock the doors or windows. They never did. There wasn’t a villain in London who would step foot on the road without an invitation, and for good reason. In Briar Court where the two-storey house surrounded by high brick walls – the Lodge – was situated, security was tighter than at Buckingham Palace.

As the two cars pulled out, the Star’s red Mini and Dave’s black Rover, another car with darkened windows pulled out in front of them. Before they’d travelled fifty yards yet another car with similar windows had pulled up behind them. From the upstairs windows in various houses

men watched the convoy move slowly to the corner and then sat back to continue their watch, feeling some relief that the family had left their patch without incident.

The great concrete and glass office buildings had emptied and the lunchtime crowds filled the pavements and burst into the roads. The cafés and restaurants and pubs were full. The convoy joined a stream of traffic and slid on to the North Circular. The four-storey red-bricked hospital loomed, the entrance canopy fanned out before them. Scruffy men carrying cameras and microphones leapt from their places and made for the slowing cars. As the family left to push their way through the press of reporters, two men appeared and slipped quietly into the driving seats of the cars and drove them to the park. Dave led the family to the glass doors of the lobby entrance, searching Fleet Street's faces for one that he recognized. Passers-by turned to watch the commotion, trying to put a name to the face. People inside looked stern and annoyed, upset by the intrusion, and wondered in turn who was getting the media attention. One or two officials shook their heads in dismay and muttered about the hospital being turned into a circus.

The wide starkly-lit entrance hall, smelling faintly of disinfectant, housed a shop, a café where the seats were uncomfortable and the fixed tables cluttered with empty cups and saucers, various receptions, clearly marked and signposted corridors radiating from both sides and, at the far end, a bank of lifts. The family went swiftly across the tiled floor, passing the busy receptionists. Their footsteps seemed loud and urgent. Tommy put his arm around Sally's shoulders and Theca flashed a secret message to Ted. They reached the lifts and stood aside as a couple of name-tagged specialists in white coats came out laughing. In the enclosure of the lift Tommy asked, "Was it like this last night?"

"Worse," Dave said flatly. "The TV people had a van outside but we had that moved. The BBC weren't keen on the medical programmes we had in mind. We promised them something starring their own cameramen."

The lift halted abruptly and the doors slid open. They moved out to the third floor reception and stood by an area of seats and a drink machine while Dave went across to the desk. Moments later he returned and told them, "He'll be with us in two minutes. Let's sit down. Dad's comfortable." They sat tensely, straight-backed, aware of every tiny movement. Tommy lit a cigarette. A group of passing nurses gave him disapproving glances.

"You shouldn't smoke in here," Sally admonished, thinking perhaps that was the reason for the dark looks.

"Look, there's an ashtray," he said in defence.

She saw it and nodded.

"You shouldn't smoke anyway."

They watched a tall, slim man, dressed in a dark blazer and flannels lean over the reception desk, glance their way after talking to the girl sitting there, and then approach. Under his rich tan his gaunt looks indicated something in the region of forty-five. He smiled briskly, put a folder under

his arm and rubbed his spotless hands together. There was honesty in his square features. He looked carefully at the five of them and chose Sally.

“Mrs Smith?” His voice was touched with a French accent.

He sat down opposite and shuffled some papers from his file. His knowledgeable, almost sad eyes met Sally’s and moved to Theca, and then addressed the others.

“It’s not very good, I’m afraid. It doesn’t look good. As you know we operated to remove a blockage but...” He shook his head. “It’s not very good at all.”

“Is it cancer?” Sally blurted out the question, fighting for control.

“There is a growth that is widespread and we’ve taken a section for examination. I’m unable to identify it and it will be a few days before we know whether it is malignant.”

“What are you saying?” Sally asked.

The others looked grim-faced and resigned.

He raised his hands and offered, “A few weeks, a month.”

Sally blurted, “A month!” She looked horrified. The thought grooved its way across her forehead.

“Maybe longer,” the Frenchman added quickly, gently.

Sally was numbed, unable to speak, unwilling to comprehend.

Theca asked: “If you don’t know what it is how can you tell it’s a month?” Her voice was slightly hostile.

“You’ve always got to remember,” the consultant went on, “that while I speak to you in medical terms there is someone up there who has the last say. And He might decide He doesn’t want him, maybe, for a year, maybe two...”

Dave asked, “Have you spoken to him?”

The consultant nodded. “Yes, we talked this morning.”

“How is he taking it?”

“He is a very strong man. We managed to ease the immediate blockage and obviously he’s a lot more comfortable. We won’t do much more until we get the results.”

“If he’d come in earlier would it have made a difference?”

The consultant shrugged. He'd heard that question so many times. At length he said, "Even a year ago would not have made a difference."

Tommy remained motionless, gazing at the floor.

Ted said, "When can we take him home?"

The consultant seemed taken by surprise and his guard slipped momentarily. "Oh. Oh, well..." He shook his head to give himself time. Eventually he said, "Not for ten days at least. We must wait for the results then we can talk of that."

"It's important for us to get him home," Ted insisted.

"I can understand that." The sympathy hushed his voice to a whisper. "Let's wait for the results."

Sally asked quietly: "Can I go in and see him? I've brought some things." The consultant smiled sadly, "Of course."

"I'll come with you," Theca said.

"No!" Sally said firmly. "I'll see him on my own." She stood and picked up her bag and walked, a lonely figure, toward the ward entrance.

The consultant got to his feet. "You must watch out for her," he said and collected his notes. "I'll see you again." He moved off toward the reception. Dave caught up with him and the others watched although they couldn't hear what was said.

"You know who you've got in there, Doc. What can we do to give him a better chance?"

The consultant hesitated before he said, "This is something that cannot be fixed." His voice, so gentle and sympathetic when speaking to Sally, was now edged with contempt. "There is not a thing in the world that you can buy, or a surgeon or a hospital that will give your father a moment in the world longer that he will get here. And that is not very long."

Dave's expression hardened. "Out of respect for my old man we're seeing you here; we've come to you. He's a great believer in the Health Service. Don't get carried away with the idea."

The consultant studied Dave out of narrowed eyes. Tight-lipped, he said, "It was mentioned to me that your family has, how was it put? A certain influence? Let me make one thing quite clear to you. Your family will receive the same response from me and from my staff as any other family in similar circumstances. Do I make myself clear? No more and no less."

"Did I ask you for any favours?"

"If you didn't ask, then you haven't been turned down. Is that not so?"

“That sounds like a good place to leave it.”

The consultant nodded briskly, turned on his heels and left Dave looking thoughtfully after him. Dave wasn't angry or even annoyed but he thought that one day, after the event, he might hurt the man, just a little, just to make a point.

From the starkly lit waiting-room where they sat and waited for Sally, where Tommy fed a coin into the drinks machine to obtain coffee for the Star of the Veldt, a corridor led from the lifts past the reception desk, past the ward sister's office on the left-hand side, past the sterilization room and the toilets, to an open-planned ward that housed two rows of neatly made beds. All but two beds were occupied and an attendant and a nurse were busily making ready for visiting hours. Two of the beds were screened and, from the others, patients read quietly or watched, curious that a woman had been let in early to see the patient in the left-hand bed at the far end of the ward. They saw her bending over the patient, saw their lips move as they spoke, saw her clutch his hand in hers, his face tug into a huge grin and then her tears sparkling in the fluorescent wash.

Chapter 9

Shortly after getting married, Dave had moved into a seven-bedroom detached house on the Ridgeway. Since he had inherited three children from his wife's first marriage and later added two of his own, he needed all the space he could get. Things would get easier now that Patricia's eldest daughter, Jessica, was married. The weekend just gone, the marriage and her flying off to honeymoon in North Africa, seemed an age ago.

The house stood back from the main road, guarded on all sides by a high brick wall. Tall sweet chestnuts and thick evergreen shrubs surrounded the front garden. A gravel drive reached its end around a knot of camellias. At the rear of the house was a modest indoor swimming pool with a sauna enclosure built into one end and a gym next to that.

Soon after leaving the hospital Dave's Rover crunched on the gravel. A couple of minders closed the wrought-iron gate behind him. He checked the time and knew exactly where to find his wife. Patricia was on a health kick; the necessary worry that mothers experience during the run-up to a daughter's wedding had left her out of sorts and, according to her, desperately in need of the old routine. Dave found her in the pool. She'd completed thirty lengths but her breath was barely raised. She saw him, gave a little wave and used the metal rungs to climb out. She reached for a towel.

“You really don't need all this. You look in good shape to me.”

“Ugh! Look at this.” She pinched an inch or so of flesh around her middle. She slipped a robe over her swimsuit. “What happened?”

Dave repeated what the consultant had said and watched her face fall. She reached for her spectacles. They slightly enlarged her eyes and seemed to increase the compassion in them.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry.”

“Theca is staying with Mum for a few nights. We’re going to see him tonight. Mum wanted to be alone with him this afternoon.”

“That’s understandable. God, she must be feeling wretched. You all must be. I’ll get across to see her.”

“I’m not stopping,” Dave said. “But I wanted to let you know.”

She nodded gratefully but in her eyes there remained a hint of disappointment.

Another car rolled over the gravel and moments later Jimmy Jones peered through the pool window, acknowledged Pat’s wave and Dave’s nod and walked nonchalantly to the open door. Jimmy Jones had been one of his father’s most trusted employees and two years previously had become Dave’s right-hand man. It was not uncommon to find him at the house. He was considered a part of the family. His dark visage and sharp looks were trusted and totally accepted by the children. He was a stocky, good-looking man of part Indian or Pakistan extraction. He had never been sure for his Welsh mother had never bothered to ask.

“How did it go, Boss?”

For a second time but without some of the detail, Dave recounted what the consultant had said. They said goodbye to Pat and made their way back to the cars.

“Find out about that consultant,” Dave said. “He sounded French, Levy or something. He’s got an attitude problem. Wait till it’s all over then sort him out.”

That was enough. Jimmy Jones knew exactly what was required. On occasion it was necessary to remind people who was in charge. Perhaps not this week, or this month, but at some time in the future the Frenchman would meet with a little misfortune. If he had children it might be that they disappeared for an hour or two. They would turn up totally unharmed and none the worse for the experience, but in the horror of those two hours a parent can learn a lot of respect.

Dave continued, “Better send someone to Tunisia to keep an eye on Jessica and John. And make sure someone keeps an eye on Theca’s kids as well. A discreet eye! She’ll go spare if she finds out.”

“What now, Boss?”

“The hotel first,” Dave said without changing his expression. “I’ll be about an hour. Keep an eye on the foyer for me. I’ve got to make the hospital about seven. I’ll see you in the club after that.”

Jimmy Jones followed Dave across London to Park Lane and took up his station in the hotel reception. If any unwelcome face showed up and that included any press photographer who wanted faces for the Sunday supplements, he had plenty of time to warn Dave.

For Dave Smith the last couple of years had been coated in lethargy. He'd gone through the motions, hiding his sense of increasing languor from all but his wife. His feeling of detachment was fed by a growing suspicion that the old days were finished. The period of enforced idleness, the security that had existed for over a decade, had dulled the essence of his motivation. He needed an enemy, someone to fight. But just lately things were stirring again and Dave recognized the old feeling; something deep within him was beginning to spark. The trouble was one thing, the threat from Scotland sharpened his senses and pushed anger back into his eyes, hooded them so that his look was vaguely contemptuous, but Sharon Valenti played a part in it too. After all this time she remained a challenge. When her eyes flickered his way they seemed to question his masculinity – appreciating, certainly, but querying also. In a peculiar sense he felt that he had to prove something. That it was reckless made it all the more exciting. The feeling was extraordinary and mixed now with the danger, the threat to the family, it was inseparable. He was suddenly alive, heady with old sensations, and his instincts were being recharged by the moment.

Before Dave had properly closed the door on the seventh floor room – no penthouse suite this time; no suite for the wicked – Sharon Valenti had flown into his arms. Her negligee parted on the way and flashed him a nipple and a quick peep at genuine blond curls.

“Oh my darling! I thought you weren't coming. You're so late!” The words, fired in her staccato New England delivery, came breathlessly, between kisses. Her accent remained untainted by the years she'd spent in Runnymede.

She didn't stop to hear his excuse or to find out about his father. Those things would keep. She was all that he could have wished for. Being unable to bear children had kept her vagina duck-arse tight and she held him inside her and rippled against him, and he was drawn out, stretched, and the sensation was almost unbearable.

And yet there was something mildly detached and adrift about it all, a sensation of familiarity, that he felt at once comfortable and yet faintly disappointed. As he lay against her he experienced a sense of panic, an unreasonable fear that gripped his thoughts, mocking him. In that moment of introspection he felt that his time was running out, that something was creeping up on him and that sooner or later he would have to turn and face it. But there was no holding back. His release was urgent, vital, and when, through clenched lips she murmured, “Oh God! Oh my God!” a little smile played with his expression. It was not out of satisfaction, or even wantonness, simply the exquisite combination of power and self-destruction.

The guilt that Dave felt – that he should be indulging while his father lay close to death – lent an edge to his violence, and he hurt her.

While they made up afterwards she said, “Tony's got something going down. He's been making quite a few trips lately.”

“Oh,” he said.

“A couple back home. Thank God he didn’t take me. It would have stopped me seeing you.” She squeezed his hand against her breast.

“He’s back now?”

“Oh yes, unfortunately. But he’s buzzing. He’s up to something.”

“Like what?”

“If I get anything you’ll be the first to know.”

“Any visitors?”

“Just the usual crowd, no one I don’t recognize.”

“Heard anything about South America maybe?”

“No.”

“What about the word ‘distribution’? Heard that in passing?” She shook her head.

“What then?”

“He sings. He gets up earlier.”

“Fuck me. That does sound serious.”

She punched his arm and said, “Don’t make fun of me.”

“Sweetheart, would I do that?”

“On the other hand, I love it when you talk dirty.”

She moved her behind gently against him and snuggled in closer. He kissed the back of her neck. There were striking similarities between Sharon and his wife that had not gone unnoticed. He often toyed with the notion that the likeness gave him a certain security.

She sighed, “Christ, I’m exhausted. I could sleep.”

He smiled grimly.

“Every time with you it’s the same. I feel stretched to a pulp. It hurts, but in a nice kind of way. It shouldn’t, but it does. Every time is like the first time over again.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean I love you, you know that, but it’s something else too. I need to feel some pain. I like it. Not in any weird sense, but in the sort of submission, the laying waste, the feeling like a tom, almost, whose trick has just been a part of the rent, it’s an act of vengeance, pure and simple.”

“Vengeance?”

“Yes. Can you understand that?”

“I think so.”

“I hate him more than anything in the world. But I’m not stupid. I know I’m tied to him for life. There’s no way he’d let me go. He’d kill me before he’d do that. So taking in his sworn enemy is a small consolation. Got it?”

“That sounds like serious shit. How long have you felt this way?”

“I’m not using you, Dave. This is just an extra, the icing on the cake. I’ve loved you forever. You must have known that.”

“It can’t do any good to hate someone so much, not all the time. Anyway, if he doesn’t know about it, you aren’t doing him any harm.”

“I know that. But the feeling is for me, not him. Let me tell you something.” She lowered her voice. “I shouldn’t, but what the hell. After leaving you I don’t bathe or take a shower. I’ll go back and tell him that I’m kind of horny. He used to be a regular little rabbit. I’m talking three or four times a day. Not that he was any good, but he’s lost it altogether now. I know he’s seen doctors, the lot, and they put it down to narcotics. He was in and out of hospital dozens of times. I think the episode with you started it all. He got rid of all the mirrors in the house. We’re talking serious psycho shit here, a regular Norman Bates. But that was ten years ago.”

Dave gulped.

“Anyway, his addiction was one of the reasons they sent him over here. If he couldn’t sort himself out, then he couldn’t go home. The old man O’Connell took him in hand, got him off the junk and gave him back some kind of self-respect. But it was too late for his dick.”

“What’s it got to do with you not taking a shower?”

“Whoah! Don’t rush me. I’m coming to that. Even though he can’t get it up himself he still feels he has to look after me. He doesn’t, of course. He hasn’t got a clue. But I let him think he does the trick. He uses his fingers and his tongue. While I’m still tingling from your touch the old fool thinks he sucking out my own release. He doesn’t realize he’s getting his mouth full of you! His nose – what’s left of it – has been shot to hell by the coke; he can’t smell the difference!”

Dave smiled.

“You don’t mind?” she asked. Her back was still to him.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m pleased he’s not fucking you. It’s selfish, I know, but I never said I was perfect.” He reached to the side table for his Rolex and said, “It’s time I made a move.”

As he headed for the door he said, “Sweetheart, I’ll have to bell you, and let you know when and where. I need to stay close to home for a while; at least until I know what’s happening to the old man.”

Before he closed the door she nodded her understanding and blew him a kiss over the palm of her hand.

Dave found Jimmy Jones near the lobby telephone in a position that gave him a good view of the entrance. No mention was made of Dave’s diversion or the fact that he’d kept Jimmy waiting. It was accepted, a part of the job; it was questionable whether Jimmy Jones had even thought about it.

As they walked through the lobby Dave glanced through the glass wall partition into the bar and his step faltered. The years were peeled away and for a moment he was flat on his back and looking up into the lifeless eyes of a blond man.

He caught Jimmy’s arm.

“Clock the fair-haired geezer chatting up the barmaid. Have you seen him before?”

Jimmy Jones peered through the glass. The tall middle-aged man was perched on a bar stool, his elbows resting on the bar surface as he leant forward to talk to a woman behind the bar.

“Yeah, I’ve seen him around,” Jimmy said. “He came in about twenty minutes ago. Do you know him?”

“We met before; a long time ago. He had more hair in those days.”

Jimmy muttered, “Didn’t we all.”

They reached the entrance when Dave paused. “Look, I don’t believe in coincidence. Get a make on that guy, will you? How long has he been in town? Where’s he staying? What his name is for fuck’s sake.”

“OK Boss.”

“Make sure Sharon gets out of here OK. Make sure he doesn’t follow her. If he does, get a couple of guys together and get in his way. It shouldn’t be difficult. One of his legs is shorter than the other.”

Jimmy nodded. If he was surprised by the request it didn't show.

"I'll catch you at The Tower later," Dave said and left him to it.

Dave cut across Hyde Park Corner and Belgrave Square and made a left into Sloane Street. A few minutes later he pulled up on the Embankment opposite Battersea Park. The East End seemed a long way off, much farther than two pages on the A-Z. The city was changing by the day – and he didn't like it one bit. Great chunks of it had been turned into ghettos. London had always had its foreign quarters but this was different. They had been allowed to take over. One day he would take them on. He sighed and took a steadying breath, drawing in the smell of the river. Father Thames never changed as it twisted through the decaying capital, and even when the grim sky lent its depression to the water it remained constant and somehow comforting. There was something belittling about the river and its glorious history that drew him back time and again. The ebb and flow, its heartbeat, contained his ancestral blood; it whispered to him and turned his thoughts to the past. His grandfather had died in the thick water and more than that, for the same water had washed across his father and flowed into his father's heart.

Chapter 10

1926

Memory dulls both the good times and the bad and yet enhances the thing so that buildings become taller and ditches deeper, and the in-between times cease to exist. It takes something special – a sound, a smell, a certain look – to stir a recollection. The concrete and brick and smoke and grime of the city were real enough. And so were the slums that soured the hearts of the people who lived in them.

Youngsters squatted precariously on a slate roof, held there by the worn leather of their boots. They played between slats of rusted tin and corrugated iron used to cover places of missing lead, and they hung to chimneys and flues and pipes, pointing at the great plumes of steam and the belching black smoke and the occasional tongue of flame. They squatted on their haunches and laughed and joked and smoked the dog-ends that they'd found, and they kept glancing at their lookout stationed on a higher ledge as he watched for adults and in particular the adult who used his truncheon on truants. This was their den, hidden away, and the noises and smells of the narrow soot-coated streets and dark, dangerous alleys, the canals and markets, the maze of warehouses and small businesses, the tiny yards full of black mud piles and pools of stagnant water and small piles of glistening slack, filled their playground.

"It must be time to be getting back," one of the youngsters said. His name was Tom Smith. "My old man is off down south tonight and I'd like to get to go with him."

“I like your old man,” another said. His name was Simon Carter. He was heavier than Tom, but slower. He picked at tiny lumps of moss and lichen that grew on the slate and absently flicked bits of it over the edge. “He’s all right. Where’s he going then?”

“Don’t know, really. South, somewhere, by the sea.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing the sea. That would be something. One day we could take off and see it. Us lot.”

“Takes a long time to get there, even in a van. If you couldn’t get a lift it would take maybe a week.”

“You ain’t been so how do you know?”

“Southend is sixty miles. If you did ten miles a day, walking, that would be six days.”

“We could do more than ten miles a day.”

“Maybe we could, but it’s a long walk and what would we eat?”

“Take some fruit. We could nick some fruit. What does he do in Southend, then?”

“He ain’t going there. He’s going south. He’s going to the ports. Does every year. He said one year he’d take me.”

“When?”

“When I was nine.”

“You’re nine now.”

“Maybe he meant ten.”

“He’ll never take you. They all say things they never do.”

“He will. If he said it, he will. Trouble is me ma. She might not want us off school!”

They broke into laughter.

A mangy black cat skirted their roof, sprang silently on to their level and approached. The boys watched its circumspection. They saw the bald patches and the fur hanging in clumps and the swollen ticks hanging from its head. The black tail flicked. Its purr turned into a shriek as the corner of a slate glanced off its side and it flashed away over the roof.

“What did you do that for?”

“They are full of fleas. Did you see him jump?”

“There was no need for that.”

“Bleedin’ hell, Tommy, what’s the matter with you all of a sudden? It was only a soddin’ tom. Is that it, because it’s got your name?”

Tom turned to face the other boy. Simon grew at once concerned and even in his crouched position he eased himself away.

“I’m going home now,” Tom said and moved down the sloping roof.

“See you later, after dinner,” Simon shouted.

Tom eased himself over the lip of the roof, lowered his feet to a brick wall then jumped to the ground. He dusted grime from the seat of his short trousers and walked swiftly from the alley into the bustle and noise and smell of the High Street.

Lorries and vans rattled by on their balloon tyres, carts went with the clatter of hooves, bicycles hissed past, pedestrians pushed and dodged. Ahead of him the market spread out in a maze of flapping stalls. He weaved his way through the pitches piled high with clothes and junk, silver-scaled fish and freshly cut flowers, oranges in their crumpled tissues, apples polished until they shone, glinting pots and pans, and everywhere merchants shouted louder for attention. He paused by his favourite stall where the sinister ranks of second-hand furniture with its dusty smell of old wood and upholstery filled him with a reverence he could not understand; its pull remained a mystery. He flicked at a couple of boxes of tattered books marked down to a penny then noticed the Jew watching him. The owner in his navy-blue greatcoat nodded and grinned knowingly, toothlessly, and gave him a wave. Tom moved on without acknowledgement for it wasn’t wise to be recognized, even less wise to be seen talking to a Yiddish bookseller. Everyone hated the Jewboys, except the Jewish girls. They were the bogeymen and always had been. Most of them lived in the slums of Whitechapel where they hid from the Watney Street gangs that controlled that part of town.

At the corner he stopped to watch tinkers go by; the wanderers, trundling past with their broken prams full of their belongings, selling their pot-scrubbers and pegs and sprigs of lavender as they went. The horse passed him and he saw the dark superior eyes of two women who sat on the cart, and they flashed him worldly smiles. A couple of mangy dogs kept close to the wheels. He watched the little parade until it was out of sight then he crossed the road and began to climb a long hill that would take him home. A coal merchant’s dray drawn by a weary Clydesdale rumbled slowly toward him. It came to a standstill while a blackened coalman emptied sacks through a coal hole in the pavement. The old man saw him and dusted down his sackcloth and gave him a wide grin.

“All right, Tommy boy?”

“All right, Jack. Got to get on, can’t stop. Going down south.”

“That’s a good place to go.”

Tom hurried on and turned up the alley that led to his back gate. A tiny high-walled yard led to the back door. Limp washing barely stirred on the line. A tarpaulin covered a pile of timber. A tin bath rested against the steamed kitchen window. Three small outhouses contained coal, the WC and a mangle and washboards.

In the matriarchal tradition his mother carried the family and like most women in the district she had grown old before middle-aged. She said, “Your teacher was here earlier.”

Her words caught him as he closed the back door and stopped him in his tracks. She stood at the stove stirring a dark stew. Tom worked furiously for an excuse but it was hopeless. Even though his mother’s back was to him he could imagine her stern expression.

“What’s your dad going to say? I know what he’ll say and you won’t like it one bit.” She turned and looked across at him and stabbed the air with a wooden spoon. “Why didn’t you go to school?”

He shrugged. “It’s boring, Mum, and Mr Simpson is always having a go. You don’t learn nothing.”

“A lot of things in life is boring, Tommy, but you still got to do them.”

“It’s all history and dates, and countries I’ve never heard of and rivers I’ll never see.”

“You’re right. You will never see them unless you get some learning. And history is important. It tells you who you are.”

“Yeah, like Henry the Eighth. Who cares?”

“I care.”

“He picks on me and Simon, says we’re lousy, says Sim’s got scabies.”

“Most of your mates have got scabies and if they’re going to do a runner every time the medical officer visits they’ll never get shot of it.”

“How would you like to be painted purple so everyone knows?”

She folded her arms. “It catches and so does lice. You pick it up from your mates and you’ll bring it home.”

“It’s not their fault.”

“I didn’t say it was, did I? And I don’t think you should change your mates either, but you could tell them the wisdom of seeing the medical officer. And so what if other people know? Half the school is down with it.”

“That’s all right for you to say.”

She smiled gently. Already stooped in her mid-thirties, Rose’s eyes were clear and brown. She said, “You’re just like your old man.”

“I don’t look like him much. People say I look like you.”

She put down the spoon, wiped her hands on her apron and began to peel potatoes. The grey in her thick hair caught the light from the window.

“What did you tell Mr Simpson?”

“I told him your dad needed your help on the van and that you’d be back next week.”

“I thought Dad was going down south?”

“So he is,” she said quietly.

Tom’s eyes widened. “I’m going?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“You’re a lady, you know that?”

She glanced up and for an instant he saw joy in her eyes.

“And you’re a gentleman,” she said. “Now go and find your dad and tell him dinner’s on the table.”

He was gone. The back door slammed behind him. Rose watched him race across the yard to the gate, flicking at the washing as he went. He was tanned, like his father, with a touch of Gypsy in his looks and yet she knew of no traveller in either family. He was lithe and muscular and for a lad of his age, when gawkiness was the thing, he was solid and well built. Rose watched the gate swing slowly shut then dropped a potato into the stew.

The Eagle Public House was a red brick building on the corner of two cobblestone roads. A stone statue of a golden eagle, its wings spread ready for flight, perched above the heavy front doors. Inside, the dark green walls kept the bar dim even when light poured in through the toughened windows. It was smoky and cluttered and run by Peter Woodhead whose fierce visage beneath a severely cropped head kept even the most dubious members of his clientele in order. His imposing frame capped by a familiar bowler hat helped, as did his reputation that no one would take lightly. The Eagle was a landmark, its upper floors towering over the terraced businesses

and rows of houses surrounding it. It was also a well-known meeting place for those who lived on their wits. The burglars sneaked in from Hackney, the conmen and fixers from Stepney, the thieves and pickpockets from King's Cross, and the more dangerous villains from Whitechapel and the Green. They came to drink and idle and set up their deals, they came to pay their dues or receive them, and they talked in low voices and sold information. They were seldom interrupted. Good citizens knew of the place and stayed away and the police knew of the place and stayed away for most of the time. And if the police were forced to look in by their superiors, then the word was the thing and when they looked they found it empty.

Tommy Smith's place at the bar was as established as his place at his own kitchen table. From that place, with his foot on the bronze-coloured rest, with one elbow planted firmly on the bar surface to guard his pint of mild, he could observe the saloon with its tables and chairs beneath wall prints of boxing promotions and photographs of old, never forgotten fighters. Fighting was a business and Peter Woodhead had financial ties with the gym adjoining his public house. He owned it. His boys, the best fighters in town, were another reason the Eagle remained trouble free when all about them violence tumbled from the bar rooms into the streets. The talk was about boxing and dogs and the nine-day general strike and how it had stopped the trams and brought docklands to a standstill, and sometimes the proposals for the new Tilbury Docks and the way it would turn docklands, general strike aside, into a ghost town. Just lately the Zeppelin and Vesuvius had also been mentioned. Tommy Smith was certainly interested in dogs and boxing and the strike and perhaps even the Tilbury Docks, in that order, but he couldn't have cared less about the Zeppelin and he'd never heard of Vesuvius. Like most men in the bar and, come to that, most men in the whole of the East End, he blamed Stanley Baldwin for everything.

"Be back on Sunday," he said, his voice hissing over broken front teeth. He rolled a cigarette and lit it.

"In time for church," Peter Woodhouse muttered. "Hello, here's your nipper."

Tommy turned to see his boy pushing by a group of men. One of them grabbed at the youngster and hoisted him shoulder high. "What have we got here?" he shouted. "You're training him right, Tommy. A good little middleweight, I should say." Others in the bar chuckled. There was a good-humoured affinity and the boy was perfectly safe.

Tommy grinned at his son hanging in the air and shouted, "Go on, sock him in the mouth, my son!"

The man holding the boy aloft stuck out his jutting jaw for him to hit. The boy's fist, with surprising speed, landed squarely on the man's nose.

"Gawd! Stone the crows!"

A hoot of laughter erupted as the boy was dropped.

"Gawd, he's got a bleedin' sting."

The boy looked back and grinned, swelling in self-esteem. He reached his father's side.

"All right, Tom boy?"

"Yeah."

Peter Woodhouse held a glass to the light and while inspecting it said, "You ought to send him around to the gym."

"Plenty of time for that," Tommy said. "What you after, boy? You're a bit too light for a pint."

"Mum says dinner's ready."

"We better be off then. Wouldn't want to upset her, would we? And I've got to get to the ports tonight."

"She said I'm coming."

Tommy frowned. "Did she? I wonder what gave her that idea."

"Come on, Dad. I can help."

"Could you indeed?" Tommy finished his beer and wiped froth from his mouth. "Let's shake a leg then. See you on Sunday, Peter."

"Yes, see you Tommy. And you little Tom." Peter Woodhouse paused then raised his pale blue eyes from the boy. His expression hardened. "Mind what I was telling you."

Tommy nodded and said, "I will. Thanks for the tip."

As they made their way from the bar and started up the hill he held the boy's shoulder.

The youngster looked up and asked, "What was he saying?"

"It's nothing for you to worry about."

"Go on, tell me, Dad."

"Some bleeder is playing up rough. Says we ain't paying our rent proper. Stopping people at the market and hurting them."

"We pay our rent."

"It's not for the house, boy. We don't pay rent on the house. It's all ours, handed down. It used to be your granddaddy's house and before that your great granddaddy's. And one day it will be yours." He paused to relight the stub of his roll-up before continuing. "This is business. They

want a cut of the business and some of us won't give it to them. Lousy bleeders want something for nothing."

"Who is it?"

"Some nasty geezers from the Cross. Don't you take no mind to it, and don't you mention it to your ma."

"I won't, but what's the name? What's the gang?"

His father glanced down, surprised. "The KC Boys," he said. "What do you know?"

"Nothing. Simon was telling us his old man has the same bother."

"Who? Simon Carter? His old man works the docks, don't he?"

"When he can get it. He's been put off lately, and his back's been playing up. But they're on strike at the moment, or something, so it makes no difference."

"Strike a light! If they're on the make from hardship cases like that then it's worse than I thought. His mother's dead ain't she?"

"Yeah, she died when he was a kid, six or something."

His father grunted and said grimly, "Things won't get any easier for them, not now, not in the short term."

"Blood poisoning, or something. He told me. She caught it after his sister was born. Something was left behind, I think. It didn't make much sense. They cut her arms off and then her legs off and then she died. He can't remember too much about it. But it was a bit frightening."

His father nodded thoughtfully, his expression distant. He said, "Some people don't have much luck." He shook away the thought. "You tell me if you get any more whispers, boy. Sounds like you're hearing more than me. And remember, not a word to your ma."

"I know."

He grabbed his father's hand and they strolled slowly up the hill. Tommy's look suddenly engaged and he was back to his old self. He looked down at his son and grinned. "That was one hellofa shot, boy. You done well there."

Meals in the Smith's house were taken at the kitchen table. In the district the kitchen was regarded as the centre of the house and the sitting room was rarely used.

"I'll need some money off you," Rose said. "We're nearly out of everything."

“I’ve got some that will keep you going till I get back. I need a good trip. Funds are getting low. That bleedin’ clutch is costing a fortune.”

“Give my love to Elizabeth.”

“You should come with us.”

“Oh yes? And who would look after all of this? Just look at what happened to Molly when their place was empty for a fortnight, all the windows broken and everything gone. Even the tiles on the roof went.”

“We’ll only be gone a couple of days. It ain’t a week, is it? We’d be back before you know it, before the word got around.”

“It’s not worth the chance. In any case, going all that way, being bumped this way and that, just for a couple of days. A horse and cart don’t shake you around so much.”

Tommy sighed. “It’s the suspension. The springs ain’t what they were. I’ll fix them sometime and then we’ll all go out, maybe, to Epping Forest or Southend for the day.”

“I’d like that. I’d like to go back to Southend.” She looked at the youngster. “That’s where we spent our honeymoon. Mixed with the nobs in a proper hotel, we did.”

“Bed and Breakfast,” Tommy put in.

“Hotel,” she insisted. “They just didn’t serve dinner, that’s all, dinner and tea. You had to come back after tea so’s they had time to clean the room. Anyway, nobs go out to dinner.” She chuckled. “You know that.” She paused then said, “I’ve put some apples in the bag, and some sandwiches.” She turned to her son. “If you’ve finished you can go and get your other shirt on, and change your socks. Your other pair is on the bed. Don’t want you stinking Elizabeth’s house out, do we?”

Unable to speak with his mouth full, Tom rushed from the room.

“He’s excited,” Rose said. She filled two cups with tea and pushed one across to Tommy. “Don’t let him come to any bother.”

“He’ll be all right,” Tommy assured her. “He’s older than you think.”

“He ain’t growed up enough yet.”

“He’s a good lad, Rose. He’s turning out fine.”

“Make sure he keeps warm at night. It’s always cold by the sea.”

Tommy reached across and stroked his wife’s pale cheek.

“I’ll bring you something back,” he said.

Rose nodded and her lips smiled, but deep in her brown eyes was a look of sadness.

Under a darkening sky the white Morris van picked up the colour of gold as it weaved its way through the crumbling terraces of the city back streets, pinking and lurching in low gears. It crawled on through the treelined outskirts, past the buildings with their scrubbed porches and bay windows sucking light from the silent street lamps. As the dusk crept over the city and the spiralling starlings wheeled toward the flying buttresses of the Royal Courts, a low mist lifted from the river and spread through the streets. They drove into that time when the colours dissolved into powdery opaqueness and the landscape lost all form, when the mist overtook them and snaked its way along the estuaries and spread across the hedgerows and glistening fields, when tentacles of red smeared the western sky and blackness crept from the east. In the cabin Tom snuggled closer to his father’s sinewy arm and rested his head against the vaguely sinister tattoo of snake and dagger. He caught the faint whiff of perspiration and tobacco, a good clean comforting smell, and he snuggled closer still.

“You all right, my son?”

“Yeah.”

“Sleepy huh?”

“A bit.”

“It’s the fumes from the engine, see, and the lights flashing by. Puts you to sleep.”

“How long will it take?”

“Three, four hours. You get some kip if you like.”

“Maybe later.”

“Excited eh? Surprised your ma let you come after finding out about

skipping school. Mind you, I couldn’t get on with it. Never did. Sooner be out. Still, you been doing your reading and that’s the main thing. Know what I mean? What you reading now?”

“Don’t know, really, Two Cities, or something. Only done the first page. Had to give it up.”

“How come? Your ma told me you was a good little bleeder – oops, I mean reader!”

Tom shrugged. “It said it was the best time and the worst time both together. That’s stupid.”

“It sounds stupid. Who wrote that?”

“A geezer.”

“Well I know that much, don’t I? What geezer?”

“Arthur Dickens.”

“Never heard of him. I like the cowboys. I was a sucker for the westerns. I used to drive my old man hopping mad reading them all the while. Said I’d go blind.”

“So what does it mean then? The best and worst at the same time?”

“It’s a long time since I done any learning but let me explain it this way. It ain’t easy being a father, is it? Never was. When a kid is born it needs you all the time, never lets you get near the missus or get a decent night’s kip; and when it gets a bit older it wrecks your home, puts mud on the carpet, breaks everything in sight, and all you want to do is wring its bleedin’ neck; and when it gets older still, it starts to answer you back and, blow me down, it starts to believe in anyone else rather than you. So all the time you got a situation, sometimes you’re mad as hell and angry and hateful, all those things. But at the same time, no matter what the kid does, even when you’re telling him off or thumping hell out of him, you love him all the time. You can’t help it. It’s inside you. He means more to you than anything else. So maybe you could say that you love him and hate him at the same time. See? Now, when that geezer wrote that it was the best time and the worst time both together, maybe he was getting at something like that. Maybe it was his way of saying you could have two feelings at the same time.”

“I thought he was saying that for the rich people it was a good time and for the poor people it was a bad time.”

“Naw, my son. That’s always the case. Always has been. Always will be. He wouldn’t have to write that down, would he? Naw, the geezer was saying something but meaning something else. These clever bleeders are like that. That’s why they use big words; it’s to stop a fellow understanding what’s going on, see? Anyway, you read too much. It ain’t a good thing. It gives you headaches and bloodshot eyes. You’ll end up with glasses. If you read the talking stuff and skip all the rest you still get the story and it don’t take so long, see? A good little trick, that is.”

Headlights came like great flashes, blinding them, deepening the night.

“Back in the old days, before your old ma pulled you out of the hat, even when we were courting, we used to come down here, along this stretch of road. Whole families would come, the kids, parents, grandparents, even the bleedin’ great grandparents. Used to load up their carts and climb into trucks and come down here to pick the hops. Stay sometimes for a fortnight or more. The men who held other jobs, like my old man, your granddaddy who worked the markets, used to come down here for the weekends. On a good summer the fields of hops used to spread right the way to Dover. Gawd, the summers were hot in them days, hardly saw a drop of rain. Kids would be running around bare foot and bare shouldered. They’d be scrumpin’ the apples from the orchards over the road while the rest of us used to be picking from morning till night. I can still smell them now. A good smell; what life’s all about. Your old ma used to be a sprightly little

thing in those days, leaping up them wigwams to reach the top, pretty little thing full of smiles and laughter. Gawd knows what went wrong.”

“What do they use them for?”

“Brewing the beer.”

“What else?”

“Ain’t that enough? Gawd, boy, I can’t think of anything more important than that. Who needs anything else?”

“What do they look like?”

“Hops? Like fluffy sprouts, fluffy green sprouts. Rows and rows of them climbing up the wigwams and what’s more, all the plants are female. That’s something for you to know, ain’t it? They only grow one male plant at the start of each row.”

“How can they tell the difference?”

“Gawd, boy, if you don’t ask the most diabolical questions. I don’t know. Don’t think anyone knows. Maybe they got a tadger. Maybe the seeds come in a different packet, probably. But the bees know, and that’s the thing, and they do the trick, see? Go and visit an old male plant first, that’s why they’re put first in the row, then they go and stick their bleedin’ stings in all the females and what do you know? That’s it. Nature.”

“What would happen then, if they didn’t plant any of the male plants?”

“Well, for a start you wouldn’t have any honey, would you? And if you didn’t have the honey you wouldn’t have any bees and without them to do the business you wouldn’t have any flowers would you? Stands to reason, see? Then you wouldn’t have any beer. That’s a thought.”

The thought produced a frown and sent him into a worrying silence.

“I never knew that honey came only from the male flowers,” Tom said.

His father didn’t answer.

Chapter 1

1976

A telephone rang out across the air-conditioned room. It seemed louder, like an alarm, and carried the same urgency.

In the bathroom Dave Smith heard the call but continued to look into the mirror. He placed his razor on the basin ledge and picked up a freshly laundered towel. Slowly, while the ringing persisted, he rubbed away excess shaving cream that clung to his ears and neck. For a moment longer he studied his expression and saw the first sign of annoyance as it drew a veil across his eyes. He threw the towel aside, opened the bathroom door and moved across a grey tufted Axminster into the lounge. It was a huge room dominated by glass; floor to ceiling windows comprising an entire wall looked out across the city skyline. He stood at the window and as he lifted the receiver he gazed impassively at the familiar landmarks.

“Yes?”

“David?” A woman’s voice triggered a vague memory.

“Hello?” In the background he could make out Creedence Clearwater Revival and *Bad Moon Rising*.

He said, “I’m here.”

“Do you recognize me?”

“I’ll never forget that Connecticut heavy breathing. It’s been a long time.”

“Eleven years.”

“That long?”

“You made a lasting impression,” she said and laughed, a clotted laugh that focused his memory so that her image came flooding back.

The hairs on his arms prickled. He saw his narrowed eyes in the glass. For a second his reflection surprised him. Without his clothes he seemed taller and younger.

“Where’s Tony?” he asked. “Are you still with him?”

“Unfortunately I am.” A pause seemed to go on forever before she said, “We’re over here for some shopping. At least, that’s what he says. But you can guarantee that it’s business. Nothing happens around Tony that isn’t business.”

Dave nodded into the handset.

“I’ve got to see you, Dave,” she went on, breathlessly now. Edginess had crept in. “Can you make it?”

“When?”

“Right now. This minute. You know how it is? You’ve got to make the most of it. I can’t be sure of getting another chance. He’s out for the entire day. I’m supposed to be shopping.”

There was silence for a moment, even the Revival had packed it in.

He said, “You still there?”

Eventually she came back on, her voice strangely distant: “I’ve thought about you. It’s never happened with anyone else.”

“Where?”

“Same place, for old times’ sake... He’s taken everyone with him. I’m here on my own.”

“It’s bloody dangerous, Sharon. Can’t you get out?”

“He might have someone tailing me, Dave. You know what he’s like. They could be waiting in the lobby. But you could get in. Nobody would know you’re coming up here.”

“Give me half an hour.”

Dave dropped the handset on to its cradle and for a moment remained motionless, wondering if he’d made a mistake.

The late morning August sun burst through the cloud and bounced off the distant river and as the concrete shimmered and the glass exploded the city became a different place.

Twelve years earlier Sharon Zinn had appeared naked in *Playboy*. She was seventeen. Later that year she married an American gangster, Tony Valenti. He was a member of the New York Mafioso and she married him for his power and for his money. He was a small wiry man of forty. She was a beautiful blonde, and even without stilettos she still towered over him by a good four inches. Love had not been involved but he was happy and he liked to show her off. He would not allow the resumption of her modelling career. The elevated heels he took to wearing were, in the eyes of the Long Island dons, the sign of a flawed character.

In April of 1965 Tony Valenti accompanied Angelo Bruno on a trip to London. He brought Sharon along as an accessory. He saw her as a status symbol and enjoyed the envy – perhaps even jealousy – he detected in the faces of his associates. They stayed at the Park Lane Hilton. Bruno had come over to meet the Krays to discuss some hot Canadian securities he wanted to

offload in Europe. He was also keen to expand his involvement in the Mayfair clubs and, at the time, he thought that the Krays might be ideally situated to handle his interests. That was not important. What was relevant was that Sharon noticed the eighteen-year-old Dave Smith in one of the Hilton bars and she couldn't take her eyes off him.

Even though his father had told Dave to give the Krays and their nancy boys a wide berth – for some time he'd been concerned that the twins were gathering some powerful friends in Whitehall and the media, and even the Old Bill seemed to be looking the other way – Dave was drawn to the glamour and razzmatazz that surrounded them. Celebrities from both the UK and America, along with the customary photographers from the Sunday papers, were never far away. It was in the bar that Reggie Kray introduced Dave to Angelo Bruno and his entourage and, when the others retired to a quiet corner to discuss business, Valenti had no hesitation in asking Dave to keep his wife company and to escort her, when she'd had enough, to their room. “She was a *Playboy* centrefold,” he boasted. “And a movie star. If you ask her real nicely, kid, she'll give you her autograph.”

She was perched on a bar stool, toying with the stem of her drink. She watched his approach through the mirror behind the bar. “Did my clothes just disappear, or did you take them off one at a time?”

Her eyes flashed in the mirror and the beginnings of a smile tugged at her lips.

He laughed out loud.

“Was it that obvious?”

“I hope no one else noticed. Tony's kind of funny about things like that.”

“He doesn't strike me as funny at all.”

She lifted her drink.

“You're bored?”

“You could say.”

“How can anyone be bored in London?”

“It's like a strait-jacket,” she said. “Being married to these guys is worse than marrying into your Royal Family. You can't make a move without them knowing!”

“That bad?”

“You can believe it.”

“Tony told me about the films.”

“The movies? He tells everybody about them. They were the beach movies, surf rolling in and girls busting out of bikinis in every other frame and no one over twenty on the beach, except for Frankie Avalon, that is. At a push he was old enough to be our daddy. I was the one playing volleyball. I was the one in the blue bikini. It matched my eyes. *Beach Party* and *Bikini Beach* – did you see them?”

Dave shook his head and said slowly, “I’ll watch out for them. If necessary, I’ll get the family to buy the local Odeon.”

“Keep going. You’re pushing all the right buttons.”

He gave her a long studied look.

She smiled and flipped open a red pack of du Maurier. Her gold lighter flashed.

“I’m getting a taste for your English cigarettes. Do you want one?”

He caught a whiff of petrol and said, “I don’t use them.”

She blew him a jet of smoke and lifted her eyebrows and said matter-of-factly, “What now?”

“Was there a casting couch?”

“Hell, in Hollywood you have to screw security just to get on the lot.”

Dave smiled and glanced in the bar mirror. The far table was animated. Knowing Ronnie, the meeting would last well into the small hours.

“Drink up,” he said. “I’ll take you home.”

“Your place or mine?”

With scant regard for their safety it began in the lift, continued in the corridor and climaxed on the floor of Valenti’s suite. He left her there, on the carpet, with the hem of her evening gown wrapped around her waist and the only underwear she’d been wearing hooked around one ankle. She smiled at him and said, “You English are kind of friendly. Whatever happened to that reserve we hear so much about?”

Eleven years later Dave remembered it all. As he motored across to see her again he was stirred by the memory of their first meeting.

He left the car at the service entrance and slipped a uniformed guy on the door a tenner.

The man tapped his cap and said, “It’ll be in the usual place, Mr Smith.”

It was check out time and the reception area was busy. It suited him. The more faces on the ground the less likely he was of being recognized. He took the lift to the twelfth then used the stairs to Valenti's suite. The corridor with its deep spotless carpet was empty.

The years had done nothing to change her. Even now she could have stepped right out of the centrefold and still wouldn't need the touch-up artist. She stood framed by the doorway, her blond hair cascading over her shoulders and flaring in the light that piled into the room behind her.

"What kept you?" she said. "You're thirty seconds late." Her eyes flashed just as he remembered and her mouth widened into a wicked smile.

"I forgot how many stairs there were."

She waved him inside. Her skimpy, ivory-coloured slip rippled and clung to every curve.

"You're looking good."

"So are you," he said.

"Come on, let's not waste time. We've only got about eight hours. They won't be back until eight."

"Don't you want to be courted?"

"Just come here and make love to me. I've been waiting eleven years for this."

He closed the door and pinned her against it. Her lips were hot. Her tongue fluttered against his.

"Jesus!" she said when he pulled away and she gulped in air.

He picked her up and carried her toward a leather sofa. Half way across the deep pile he paused to kick off his shoes. He set her down as though she weighed nothing and sank beside her. His hands worked beneath the silk. He pulled down her underwear and raised her slip, for a moment savouring her thighs. She rubbed her legs together, moving her blond hair. It was a novelty. It hid nothing. He used his mouth and heard her tiny catch of breath.

Suddenly she was pulling his hair, digging her fingernails into his shoulders. Her body coiled, her grip became almost unbearable until, slowly, she relaxed and he heard her sigh as she released a long breath. He looked up and smiled. His lips were wet and sparkling. A thread of something, spittle or her, wavered between his mouth and her crotch and glistened in the light that streamed in over Hyde Park.

"Take your gear off," she said. "I want you to abuse me. Be rough!"

"I think I can manage that," he said as he struggled out of his clothes. She caught hold of him.

“Jesus, I remember you,” she said. “It’s like meeting an old friend.”

“How long are you over here?”

“We fly back tomorrow. We live in Miami now.”

“We’ll have to make the most of today, then.”

“That’s what I was counting on.”

He nestled between her legs and brought up her slip to bare her breasts and the years were stripped away. It was all so familiar, the tiny nipples, the soft curves rising to them. That shadowy idea, perhaps the thought of domination, thrilled him. He felt the end of her and every time he slammed in he heard her gasp and every time she gasped his smile of satisfaction widened a little more.

In those quickening moments before he let go she squealed and clamped her legs tightly around him.

She laughed, “God, this is bliss. I’ve waited years.”

He cradled her head against his shoulder. She felt damp against him.

“You know,” she said, “apart from when I’ve been on my own that’s the first time I’ve come since...”

He turned to her. “You’re joking?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s been eleven years.”

“Fuck me! That’s diabolical. Why don’t you buy him a book?”

“It’s not the technique, Dave. It’s how I feel.”

“Are you telling me there’s been no one else in all this time?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“Yes, you could say.”

“You don’t know how it is. Over here he feels safe. I get some freedom. In Miami when I go downtown I get to be escorted by two of his gorillas. Sometimes I think I’m suffocating, you know what I mean?”

“Why don’t you leave him?”

She snorted. "You marry these guys for life, you know that. Where would I go? Where could I hide?"

Dave nodded, understanding even more than she knew.

"So this is it, eh?"

"Till the next time," she said. She reached up and stroked his cheek. "I love you, Dave. I know it's crazy. I know we barely know each other. But thinking of you has kept me sane all these years. Now you've filled my tank again I can go on a while longer." She sighed and pressed closer. Her left breast flattened against his chest. Her right nipple brushed against him and tickled. "Did you think of me in all that time?"

"Course I did," he said honestly. "I study that *Playboy* spread every night."

"I've got older since then."

"Not so I notice. I just wish the snaps had been taken now instead of then."

"Why?"

"They'd be more explicit now. Split fig, pictures on horseback."

She nudged him. "I think I know what you mean. Is that Cockney?"

"No, Sweetheart. It's Anglo Saxon."

Her laugh was smoky, as he remembered.

"If ever he dies," she said, "and if wishing has anything to do with it, he will. I mean, Jesus, he smokes three packs a day and gets through a bottle of JD before noon. But if he did die could I look you up?" She turned to face him. "I mean would you want me to?"

He nodded meekly. "Course I would. Blimey, I can't think of anything I'd like better."

She settled down again.

"That's what I thought," she said.

It was late afternoon when he finally made a move. She watched him dress then threw on her slip and followed him to the door.

"Let's not leave it so long next time," he said.

"I'll dream about you, David Smith."

His smile was hesitant. He nodded and opened the door. She held him back and draped herself against him. Dave half turned as he heard a shuffle behind him.

Tony Valenti stood in the doorway, his wiry Italian features darkening by the moment.

“What the fuck is this?” His voice was high pitched. It filled the room like a siren. As if dazed by what he saw he took two steps backward.

Sharon dropped her hands from Dave’s neck and followed Valenti into the corridor. “It’s not what you think, Tony,” she said feebly.

“What the fuck am I thinking? Eh?” He pulled the strap of her slip. It snapped. She held on to the front to cover her breasts. He hit her hard, in the mouth. A fine spray of blood dotted the wall. Dave watched her go down and heard the thud as she hit the carpet.

Valenti shook, his wild eyes fixed on Dave. “I know you. Don’t I know you?” He pointed at Sharon. “That’s my fucking wife!” he yelled. “That whore’s my fucking wife!”

Dave shrugged and moved past him.

“Where the fuck are you going you motherfucking son of a bitch?”

Valenti was a tiny man; his threats toward Dave were absurd. He kicked out. His chiselled toecap landed heavily into Sharon’s stomach. She rolled over and slammed into the wall.

Dave turned back to face him. “Leave her alone,” he said.

Valenti let out a strangled cry and head lowered he charged at Dave. Dave hit him once. His fist caught the little man squarely in the face. His heavy signet ring caught the flesh and ripped away the side of Valenti’s big nose. Valenti staggered backward, clutching at his face. Blood streamed from between his fingers. He began to scream. Doors along the corridor opened and people peered out.

Valenti rushed again. The pain had dulled his brain. His hands still covered his face as he tried to butt Dave with the top of his head. Dave caught him again, hard, in the middle of the chest, and Valenti collapsed in a heap over Sharon’s feet.

At the end of the corridor two men fought their way through the crowd. Dave looked up as he heard their approach. They were both all-American boys, built like Dallas Cowboys complete with shoulder pads. They charged toward him. There were twenty yards between them as Dave made the corner to the stairs. He went down four at a time, crashing against the corners. He covered three flights before pausing to listen. Nothing. He decided they’d stayed to help the little wop. Taking his time now, dusting himself down and straightening his clothes as he went, he made his way to the lifts and five minutes later he was in the car park. He found his car under a No Parking sign and an arrow pointing the way to the 007 Night Spot, the International Restaurant and The London Tavern. Apart from The Tower, it was the only place in town.

He was woken just after one-thirty by a loud knock on his door. Jimmy Jones stood in the corridor. He was one of his father's key men. He looked worried, his bright eyes unusually severe.

"I've been ringing," he said irritably.

"Pulled the phone out."

"And banging on the door for the last ten minutes."

"I was on the lash," Dave offered.

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah, I can smell it and I can see it in your eyes. Any redder and they'll be bleeding." His dark features mellowed. "You look like shit. Your liver needs a rest and then some."

"So what's with the panic?"

"Your old man's been going spare trying to get you."

Dave shrugged and glanced at his watch. "What's happened?"

"I thought you'd tell me."

Dave knew, or thought he did, and his gut tightened. He said, "There was a bit of bother earlier, at the Hilton."

"What sort of bother?"

"You know what these wops are like. They can't control their women."

Jimmy Jones grinned, "Is that all? And there I was thinking it was serious." His face dropped again. "Anyway, your old man's phone has been red hot for the last two hours. It's got to be something pretty important to keep him out of bed at this hour. By the time he spoke to me he was close to losing it."

Dave nodded gloomily. He didn't relish the prospect of facing his father, especially since his head was still reeling from the assault of half a litre of vodka. Although Dave enjoyed a position of authority – he took care of the family's collection business, controlled the foot soldiers, and was responsible for the franchises that allowed minor gangs the privilege of using the Smiths' name – he was still kept on his father's very short leash.

"I'll throw some clothes on. You better drive me over there."

Jimmy smiled quickly, without humour, and sat down to wait.

His father was a big man. His white hair was ruffled and the collar of his pyjama top ridged above a worn dressing gown. He sat in his favourite armchair, his legs crossed, his foot tapping so that his slipper slapped against his heel. The expanse of plain blue pyjama bottoms that Dave could see seemed somehow old-fashioned. His father looked drawn, and older. "You've caused me a lot of grief, boy. When are you going to learn?"

How old are you? Twenty-nine? Thirty? Then why is it you still act like an adolescent? When are you going to grow up and start acting like you're my eldest son instead of some fucking caveman?"

"Are you going to tell me what I've done, Pop? It's too early in the morning to guess."

"You've messed with the Mafia, boy, that's what. And half their fucking armed forces are on the way over here!"

Dave pulled a face as if he had tasted something nasty. Explanations were unnecessary. What worried him more than Valenti was that he didn't know how to handle his father who had little time for impropriety, even less time for indiscretion. He shrugged and filled a glass with vodka.

"Pop, it's my fault. He started slapping her about and I lost it."

"What did you expect him to do? He brings his wife over here for a little shopping to buy presents for their celebrations and some local piss artist gets his leg over. For God's sake, aren't there enough local girls? His wife! What's happened to respect and decency?"

"Blimey, Pop, if you'd have seen her. *Playboy* centrespread."

His father scowled and Dave knew at once that his excuse had simply compounded his earlier transgression.

"They're flying him home. An ambulance job for Christ's sake! Two broken ribs, and half his nose still in Park Lane!"

Dave swallowed half his drink.

"But worse than that, boy, you know what the worse thing is?"

Dave remained tight-lipped.

"You left her to face the music. You ran out on your *Girl of the Month*. How could a son of mine do that? Tell me?"

"Pop, he had two gorillas with him. There wasn't any return in me staying."

His father nodded sadly and Dave felt a sudden stab of embarrassment. The accusation of cowardice went right to the core. It would have been difficult to find a more serious indictment. The shame of it dried his throat and he finished his drink.

His father sighed and said, “Well, for your information, he’s half killed her. She’ll be in the hospital longer than the wop. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“I’m not. If I could do it over things would be different.” His father nodded reflectively.

“Meanwhile,” Dave said. “I better get some muscle together.”

“You’ll do nothing!” his father snapped. “Do you hear me? Nothing! You’ll make yourself scarce, and I mean scarce, like invisible, until I tell you otherwise. Your transport is outside. Get your bag packed and your shaving gear together. I want you out of the Smoke in the next hour.”

“Where?”

“You’ll find out. It won’t be a holiday. When I’ve sorted things out I’ll let you know.”

“Pop! How long?”

“As long as it takes, boy. I don’t know what I’m going to tell your mother. Pour me a whisky.” Dave filled another glass and carried it to his father. “Treat it as a lesson. Learn something. Now remember, you’re going to a good friend of mine. Do exactly what he tells you. Keep your mouth shut and your head down. I’ll see you when it’s all over.”

Chapter 2

Dave Smith was driven north and arrived at his destination just as a late, overcast dawn dribbled its grey watery colours from a bank of low cloud. His mood was darkened by the prospect of enforced idleness and when he saw what was to be his home for an indefinite period it turned darker and he silently cursed every American he could think of. Dave knew the city, the lights, the smells, the incessant sounds of life itself, and already he felt isolated.

During the journey he had considered his options and he felt certain his father was making a mistake. His best bet was to fight on ground that he knew with people that he trusted. It was not his way to run. He would have handled the jewel-studded Guineas in their Brioni suits and custom-made silk shirts with his own men and given them a permanent piece of dockland. That’s what they always wanted anyway. His father’s decision, which was bound to lose him some credibility, came as a surprise and, to his knowledge it was the first time the Smiths had backed away. Perhaps his father was losing touch. Perhaps the last few years of relative peace had blunted his cutting edge. Respect was the key to survival, and respect came from strength and

fear, not from running and hiding. The thought of cowardice stung him again. Who was it that said *Cowards die many times before their deaths?* Julius Caesar? Shakespeare?

Through the tinted rear windows he saw a small village, not much more than a single road lined with old cottages and one or two newer bungalows. It was just beginning to stir. One or two people moved to their cars and a paperboy was making his rounds. The road forked in one place into a tiny cobblestone market triangle and beyond that, before the roads joined again, grass footpaths widened to a village green. Everything dripped.

A strange mix of sensations churned his stomach; tiredness was there, burning into his eyes, but he felt as a refugee might, or a displaced person, as though everything he had known had been brought to an abrupt end.

Throughout the journey the driver, his father's personal driver, had remained curiously uncommunicative, almost as if he'd been instructed to keep his mouth shut. He'd been polite but his answers to Dave's probing had been to the point and conversation was non-existent. Dave was left in no doubt that for the time being his links with the family were well and truly broken.

From the village the road swung to the coast and ran parallel with the beach. The air drifting in from the North Sea was damp and pungent; a watery sun glared through the grey and lined the water's edge with dirty yellow froth. The narrow B road curled away inland and now the light shafted through the trees. A small miserable-looking cottage with a poorly maintained thatched roof and weathered timbers stood only twenty paces from the road and with a thick hedgerow concealing its path until the last moment the driver overshot and had to reverse. To the left of the drive, beyond a group of derelict sheds, a carpet of windfalls lay beneath the trees and a couple of longhaired pigs grunted around them.

Dave remained seated, motionless and stony-faced. The driver climbed out and took a suitcase from the boot. He carried it to the front door then returned and opened the rear door of the car.

"This is it, Dave. I suppose you'll get used to the smell."

Dave studied the man for a moment searching for a hint of emotion. There was none. Eventually he nodded, resigned to his fate, and climbed out.

"See you later. Take care." For the first time there was a kindness in the man's voice.

"Fuck you, son!" Dave said.

The driver offered him a cautious shrug, climbed quickly into the car and turned the ignition. Dave watched the car back out until it disappeared from view behind the thick hedgerow.

The rusty hinges of the paint-blistered front door squealed into the silence as he pushed it open.

Dave dropped his case at the door. It was even worse than he'd imagined. A small square parlour was musty and damp. It was all but inaccessible because of a huge oak table that left just a couple of feet of space around its sides.

He climbed some narrow, dangerously worn stairs that led from the one small room to a small bedroom with its ceiling slanting with the roof. A three-quarter sized bed was made up and a dresser had been polished. He found a bathroom and caught sight of his haggard looks in a mirror. He was still scowling as he made his way back down the creaking stairs.

The kitchen equipment was meagre: a porcelain sink with an unfinished work surface and a grease-filled crack along the wall, an antiquated gas cooker with a loose door and rings, a small refrigerator with just enough room inside for milk, bacon and butter, an old cast-iron stove with a store of logs beside it and an enamelled kettle on top. From the stove's open door wood ash had fallen from the grating on to a raised concrete bed. A larder was filled with groceries and cleaning utensils. Dave smiled cynically. He was going to lose weight. He couldn't remember the last time he'd prepared a meal.

The murky light in the room filtered in through casement windows and was just sufficient for him to find his way around. He found a tea caddy and teaspoon, and some mugs hanging on hooks in the larder. He made some tea but could manage only a mouthful before creeping back up to the bedroom. He fell asleep thinking that his exploration of the warm, secretive areas of the woman from *Bikini Beach* had not been worth it.

He was woken by noises from below. He negotiated the stairs and found a heavy-set man holding a boiling kettle above the teapot. He was red-faced with wide muddy eyes and a nose criss-crossed with map-like formations of purple lines. His hair was short and peppered with grey. Broad shoulders thrust forward, thick eyebrows raised and the face broke into a rugged smile.

"I'm Joe Daley. You look like shit!" His shoulders relaxed. His eyes remained curious. "Dave?"

Dave nodded and accepted a mug of rich tea. He noticed a .410 leaning against the wall.

"Well, remember the name, Daley. You're my nephew visiting. My place is two hundred yards up the road. I've been told to keep an eye on you, so I'll do that. I'll be down from time to time to see to the pigs. Just remember, a London accent is a dead giveaway up here so keep away from the locals."

Dave gulped at his tea. It tasted better than his earlier effort.

"You need to run the water before you use it. It tends to lie in the pipes," Daley said as if reading his mind. "Someone will come in from time to time to clean up and change the towels. If you need anything special that's the time to ask. You won't see much of me but I'll be around, watching. If you keep your head down we don't expect any trouble. We country folk like the peace and quiet."

“This is Cuddy Hughes’ manor. Do you work for him?”

“That isn’t your business. There are books and there’s the telly. If you want to walk out, get some air, that’s OK. But you walk away from company, right?”

“It’s your show, my son.” Dave shrugged.

“I’m not your son,” Daley said sternly. “I’m your uncle.” He finished his tea, picked up his shotgun and moved heavily to the door. “I’ll leave you to do the dishes. See you around.” He had to bend slightly in order to go through.

For two days Dave barely ventured from the four whitewashed cottage walls. He worked his way through two tattered thrillers and watched television until he was so bored he could stand it no longer. The small parlour became claustrophobic and his gloom deepened by the hour. By lunchtime on the third day he could stand it no longer and was ready to take on Daley or anyone else who tried to stop him. It took him the best part of ninety minutes to walk to the tiny village and find the Royal Oak, a red-bricked building he’d noticed on his way through.

The bar itself was typical of the country pub: panelled walls covered in watery prints of the hunt, treated ceiling joists and a spitting log fire that threatened the clothes of anyone standing within two yards of it. The fire was absurd. It was August and the temperature even outside was in the mid-seventies.

A balding publican wearing a RAF moustache and tie stood behind his bar next to a heavily made-up woman in her fifties who might have been his wife. There were a few others in the room, a cross section of rural life: some elderly couples sitting around the edge, some men playing dominoes, and a group of youngsters standing at the bar. Quite naturally most of them glanced his way; it was that sort of place, off the beaten track, seldom visited by strangers; a corner of England still entrenched in the first half of the century. Dave ordered a bitter and carried the drink to the far end of the bar, away from the youngsters.

A screech of brakes and the slamming of car doors heralded the arrival of a tall youth who led in a woman wearing spectacles. Before the other youngsters gathered around, her glance skated across the room and fell momentarily on Dave. In that instant he felt that he knew her. She was in her mid-thirties, a straw-blonde, attractive without being beautiful. Her mood was fickle as though she was unsure of herself; smiling to share a joke perhaps, smiling out of politeness, composed for an introduction then deliberate to cover a stifled yawn. She was older than the others and uncomfortable. There was something puzzling about her apprehension. Her movements were uncomplicated and confident, but her expression, more particularly in her brown eyes, gave a clue to her restlessness: she was bored.

With every opening of the street door more people arrived in small groups until the room became crowded and noisy. Smoke, curling in layers about the yellowing lampshades was whipped into spirals by the draught. Most of the youngsters were of similar stock to those found in any country public house but there were exceptions: the pedigreed, the bloodstock, parading.

Dave decided it was time to leave. He'd been warned away from gatherings. In any case he was sick of the spoon-fed crap he was hearing. He finished his drink and noticed that the bright eyes slightly enlarged by the spectacles had fastened on to him again. Her face, framed by her curling blond hair, held a trace of amusement. Her wide mouth broke into a faint smile. It wasn't friendly, or even a greeting. Dave felt momentarily flustered. He was amazed at the feeling. He wondered whether he'd been staring, for it was that knowing sort of look she gave him. Her escort, one of those exceptions, diverted her attention.

Dave made his way from the bar and found a small grocery store that doubled as the off-licence. He purchased a copy of *The Telegraph*, a copy of Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* – he'd seen the film starring Edward Fox a couple of years previously and thoroughly enjoyed it – some fresh bread and milk, and two bottles of Famous Grouse – the vodka they carried was a cheap make he'd never heard of – and began the long walk home. He'd covered a hundred yards or so when he caught sight of his minder, the shotgun held loosely in his arms. Dave chuckled to himself. His father had been right. It was not going to be a holiday. Even so, under the afternoon sun the beech trees around the village church were still and the hedgerows sparkled and by the time he reached the cottage there was some country colour to his city skin.

He dreamt of the Smoke, the picture-post-card city: Tower Bridge, the river, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, the stations, the complex road systems cutting through the grand buildings and the superstores with their vast windows of glistening goods, from the sleek opulence of Knightsbridge to the East End traps, from the King's Road to Berwick Street, from Piccadilly decorated in superficial neon to St James', from the abortion clinics around Oxford Circus marked for the overnight visitors who carried their unwanted lumps by the Post Office Tower, to St Paul's Cathedral, where perhaps those visitors could stop to pray for the souls they left behind.

Thunder crashed and Dave sat up sweating. The strong North Sea wind gusted, trees swayed and creaked and rain beat the cottage walls, and above the clamour of nature came the sounds of a slamming door.

Armed with a torch he'd discovered earlier and wearing a huge canvas raincoat that he found hanging on the kitchen door, he went out to the sheds. The loose door was swinging on the last of the four sheds used as storage space for gardening equipment and an assortment of rusty tools. He wasn't surprised to find a series of wet footprints on the dusty surface of the shed floor. His minder, Joe Daley, had been doing his rounds and no doubt stopped for shelter. He heard the pigs grunting in the next shed. The wind strengthened and rushed through the trees. Dave secured the door, pulled up the wide lapel and splashed back to the cottage.

It was late morning when Joe Daley pulled up in a battered green Austin. Dave was leaning on the orchard fence watching the pigs wallow in the spongy ground. The sun glared from a clear sky into air purified by the night rain. The subtle gradations of light and shade were lost. Daley's huge shoulders bunched over the wheel as he pulled on the hand brake. Driving had taken all his concentration. His eyes were curiously threatening.

"Getting around a bit?" He spoke slowly and Dave got the impression that Daley was unsettled.

“Just getting rid of the cobwebs.”

The eyes narrowed.

“You’ve been getting rid of a few these last few days.”

Dave shrugged and turned back to the pigs.

Daley pulled a sour face. He grunted his resignation. “The boss wants to see you. Dinner. I’ll pick you up at eight. Be ready.”

Dave smiled. So that was it. The invitation had annoyed the big man. Special treatment for the man from the Smoke was playing on Daley’s nerves. Wet-nursing him was probably irritating enough, checking the grounds in the middle of the night in the middle of a thunderstorm was damned uncomfortable, but actually picking him up and acting as chauffeur was an absolute shit.

That evening in a sprawling manor house situated beyond a series of low-slung, red-bricked buildings that housed stables and a swimming pool, Dave met Coddy Hughes for the first time.

His father had once told him about Coddy and a friendship that had developed over the years. His high regard for the man was clear from the outset. He’d described Coddy as a thick-bodied man almost bald even at that young age, with a circular scar right between the eyes. Coddy said it was a bullet that had bounced off his thick skull but his father had discovered later that it had been from a wooden arrow fired from a bow by Coddy himself. The arrow had snapped and whipped back at Coddy’s face. He had been nine years old at the time and fortunate to escape with his sight intact. Not many people knew the truth. The bullet sounded better.

Dave met a sixty-two-year-old bald man who wore a neck brace and needed a walking-frame to get about. He was thin and weak and the only hint of his past came from his eyes, fearless and faintly mocking. Time had been unkind; a car accident in his fifties, a whiplash, had left him crippled and all but housebound.

It proved to be a homely affair with Coddy heading the table, eating one-handed while his other rested permanently on a silver-topped walking stick, his wife, Mavis, to his left and Dave opposite her. Three others, girls aged six, ten and twelve, sat at the bottom end of the gleaming table. They were involved in other things, whispers and chatter and girlish giggles. They were the daughters of Coddy’s daughter who was out for the evening, Coddy told him and added, “Such a handful they need a minder a piece!”

Dave felt uncomfortable, conscious that they were all watching him. Once dinner was over Mavis took the girls through to an adjoining room to play Scrabble and left Dave and Coddy together. It was time for business.

“The girls have taken to you,” he said in quiet, clipped tones. He waved his free hand. “It’s the accent. They’re all mad about David Essex. All I’ve been hearing for three years is *Rock On*, and posters for *That’ll Be the Day* cover their bedroom walls.” His eyes narrowed and Dave guessed

it was time for the real business. “You went to the Oak. It’s not a good idea. Your father has asked me to look after you until he can sort out the trouble. How can I look after you if you don’t take advice?”

Coddy leant forward in his chair and filled two glasses with whisky. He pushed one across the table then settled back in his chair again.

“The village is a small place with few secrets; the stranger stands out like a nigger in the Royal Family. If you need for something you let Joe know what you want and he’ll get it for you.” He raised his head slightly from the pink neck brace and emphasized coldly, “This is not a request. You understand?”

Dave nodded. A mix of embarrassment and admiration ran through him. He understood immediately what his father had been getting at. Coddy’s authority was clear-cut, without the need of a raised voice or the lesser man’s posturing. It remained beneath the surface, and was all the more marked because of it.

“All I want to do is get back to civilization,” he said quietly, and added defensively, “No one is going to look for me up here.”

“Dave, it’s where I’ve chosen to live, and as small and as peaceful as it seems, it’s on the map. It’s my HQ. And that makes it important.” He raised his glass and emptied it before continuing. “You can guarantee that our friends across the pond have at least one contact up here because of me. Sure, it’s off the beaten track and it might seem safe, but don’t drop your guard. These people have a network bigger than the CIA. I don’t expect trouble, especially if you keep your head down, but you’ve got to understand, there’s no such thing as a certainty. Not in our business.” He mellowed and his eyes lost their edge. “It’s not so bad. Your father tells me he hopes to have it sorted in two or three weeks.”

Dave’s heart sank. Three more weeks in the country would drive him crazy. He’d already seen enough trees to last him a lifetime and as for the damp air that came in off the North Sea, it was simply not healthy. Coddy nodded as he recognized Dave’s despair.

“I’ll send the girls around to keep you company. That will get them from under my feet for a while. They love the pigs. They go out collecting the acorns.” He sighed and went on, “The summer holidays are too long. All I’m hearing all day is noise, pop music. Poofers leaping about the stages – and some of them even wear make-up. Can you believe that? It’s difficult to tell if they’re men or women. That Bowie guy started it all, I’m sure of it. You wouldn’t know whether to shake their hands or fuck them. I don’t know what the world’s coming to. It isn’t the one I remember. God help us if there’s ever another war. They’d be carrying a compact in their kitbags.” He shook his head in despair and pointed to the bottle of malt on the table.

Dave took his cue and poured out more drinks.

“I prefer this to brandy,” Cuddy said and swallowed two measures. “I shouldn’t drink at all with all the pills.” He pulled a dry face. “I’ve gone through life doing things I shouldn’t, so what the hell!”

Dave settled back, feeling more comfortable in the old man’s company. It might have been the booze, he considered, but he had a feeling it was more than that. He said, “I know you met my father during the war but he’s never discussed it. As far as he’s concerned the war never happened.”

Cuddy nodded reflectively, “That’s not a bad thing. Some men never stop talking about it.”

“It was only recently that we discovered he’d caught one in the shoulder. He didn’t tell us. It was an old-timer who used to box for Peter Woodhead told my brother Tommy all about it. When we asked Dad about it all we got was a shake of the head and something about a scratch on the shoulder.”

Cuddy gave a wry smile and shook his head, an awkward movement against the neck brace. He said, “That’s a bloody gem. A scratch on the shoulder, you say?” He laughed out loud.

It was the first time Dave had seen any humour in the man. He toyed with the crystal, turning the glass, waiting for an explanation.

Cuddy swallowed half his drink. At length he said, “You ever heard of Scratch Fox?”

Dave shook his head.

“Scratch Fox was a sergeant in your old man’s outfit. It was just before the war started. They were on manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain when one of the squaddies got himself injured and needed stitching up. Fox had your father drive him and the squaddie back to the hospital but it meant kipping overnight at Fox’s married quarters. During that night your father crept out of the house and drove into town to take care of a couple of small-time villains who’d put your granddaddy out of action.”

“Took care of them?”

Cuddy nodded and explained, “Years earlier they’d cut up your granddaddy for not coughing up protection. Your granddaddy was left bedridden. It led to him topping himself.”

Dave knew that his grandfather had drowned in the Thames; he hadn’t known that it had been suicide.

“What happened?”

“Your dad took care of it. He waited ten years for the right moment.”

“He topped them?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Cuddy paused then went on, “Unfortunately, in the early morning the sergeant heard him get back. But when the filth eventually arrived Fox gave your dad an alibi. He never did understand why the sergeant lied to the police but as it turned out, Fox was the lucky one. Back home everyone knew what had happened. They treated your father differently. The thing unspoken remained between them; not respect, exactly, unless it was the respect you have for dangerous things. When war broke out they ended up in France. Sergeant Fox got half his head blown away in Dunkirk, the town. The same volley caught your dad in the shoulder. They were left behind. That’s the way it was. The stretcher-bearers would pick them up later. Trouble was, the stretchers had enough to do on the beaches. Your dad carried the sergeant down to the beach on his good shoulder and found what was left of the squad, which wasn’t much. He was pretty busted up himself by then. Between the two of them they looked like something out of a butcher’s window.”

He paused to fill his glass then went to top up Dave’s and saw that it was still full.

“You want a beer?” The question was clipped and disapproving.

Dave lifted his glass and said, “This is fine.”

“Listen, son, a conversation that stops you drinking isn’t worth holding.”

Dave finished his drink in one and offered the glass for a refill. He said, “You’re telling me things I’ve never heard.”

Cuddy smiled briefly in acceptance.

“It’s a funny business, Dave: that as you get older and the war gets further away, you dwell on it more and more. In the end your memory turns it from being some kind of fucking horror story into something you enjoyed. I suppose that’s why so many of the old guys go back to the battlefields. They’re getting off on what their memories made of it. They’ve started to believe their own stories.” Cuddy grunted dismissively and went on, “The glory! The few! All the heroic stuff! We were running backwards like no one ever ran before. And as for all those little boats! The navy must get really pissed off hearing about them. It was chaos. Carnage is the word. There were bodies all over the shop, gutted, blown to bits, stinking. The stink was unbelievable. It took weeks to wash it off. There were legs and arms and heads lying all over the place. You could have played a game of bowls with the number of heads you saw in the street. The planes never stopped. Getting on a boat during those first few days was impossible. At one stage they stopped taking stretcher cases. Your dad and the sergeant got a change of clothes from a couple of bodies. Not that Fox could do much. He was unconscious for most of the time. No one thought he’d make it. The rest of the squad had to hide both of them to get them on board, made out they were pissed on red wine. They were only taking able-bodied by then. Anyway, they made it.

“Outside Dover all the old people’s homes, schools and the like, had been converted into casualty clearing stations. It was in a place called Cheriton that I first met your old man. I caught one in the neck so I must have looked a bit like Scratch Fox.” Cuddy touched a red scar that ran below his left ear. “Mine was fucking stupid; not even a Jerry bullet. One of our own guys was

fucking about. You'd be surprised how many of our guys got shot by our own side. Anyway, these places were only holding units until you were well enough to transfer to a proper hospital and that could have been anywhere in the country. Everyone in the ward was pretty poorly. The guy who ended up in the next bed to mine had a bullet through his shoulder and was down with pneumonia and God knows what else. He was unconscious for two days and more dead than alive. That was your dad. We spent a week together in that shit-house."

The time approached eleven; the war was spent and so was Dave's description of the family and London in general. They'd opened a second bottle of malt when the sounds of a car halting on gravel marked the arrival of the tall youth from the pub, and close on his heels, in tight trousers and open-necked shirt, the woman.

She asked Cuddy, "Hello Daddy, are we interrupting?"

"No, we've just about finished it. Come in and have a drink. This is Dave Smith. You've heard me mention his father. This is Pat, my daughter, and her boyfriend, James Osbourne."

"Hello," Dave said but the word got caught in his throat.

Cuddy Hughes splashed whisky as he poured more drinks. The couple carried them to the bar stools at the far end of the room. Dave forced himself from the sneaked glance; he found her incredibly attractive; had it not been for similar feelings during their previous encounter he would have put it down to the malt. He heard them talking while he talked to Cuddy, her low voice polished of its accent with only hints of Lincolnshire. They discussed everything and nothing in particular. She was there, on the periphery of everything, even when he faced the other way, easing off her seat to reach over the bar, stretching material across her wide hips, scratching her knee, raising her glass, beating a silent rhythm with her loose foot; a continuous movement to attract the eye.

Cuddy leant forward.

"James is a bit of a wanker," he said quietly, with a knowing glint in his eye. Whether the statement was rhetorical or an indication of Cuddy's true feelings toward his daughter's boyfriend or just to make Dave feel less impassioned was hard to tell.

Chapter 3

The following morning Dave decided to call London. He was itching for news of what was happening. He left his breakfast dishes on the table and began the walk to a kiosk he'd noticed on the seafront. The sky was clear overhead but streaked with cloud in front. A helicopter hovered over the sea, a speck; the constant hum of its rotor sounding like a distant lawnmower. The lane ran to a slow bend. The trees, thickly grouped closer to the cottage, thinned out until there were bare clearings of shortly cropped grass on either side. The land flattened and he

caught sight of the distant red box standing incongruously before the sand dunes. It was a fairly warm morning; the breeze had dropped to a whisper and the air was charged. Before long, perspiration trickled under his shirt like some fast little insect.

The helicopter swept overhead, a startling roaring blur, close enough to look threatening and fanning the wind his way. It plunged with surprising speed and swooped back to hover before him, keeping pace. He could make out the detail of its belly and the two men through its open sides who were taking more than a casual interest in him. For a moment he considered that they were Cuddy's men. He hoped they were. It hovered for about thirty seconds – it seemed longer – then soared away inland, across Cuddy Hughes' manor, cutting a grey smear across the blue until it became a speck again and then disappeared altogether. The hum refused to fade, a constant intimidation, as though the machine had cut through nature itself and left its mark.

The lane narrowed over a humpback bridge across a slow-moving stream. On the other side the grass was coarser and tufted, the earth coloured with stretches of light sand. Pools of black water dotted the area, shrunken so that the rings of dark mud at their edges dried out in stages, the outer layers cracked and lifted in a mosaic pattern of brownish hues.

Dave reached the telephone when the sun was at its peak; it was unbearably hot inside and he kept the door wedged open. A minute later he was through to Jimmy Jones.

“You OK, Dave?”

“No, I'm not.”

“Where are you?”

“I'm down on the farm, my son, knee deep in pig shit. The smell's so bad it makes the eyes water.”

“That's what comes of playing about, Dave. Women are dangerous. You should have learned. Where's the farm?”

“It doesn't matter where. Just tell me what's happening?”

“It's too quiet for comfort. Something's going down but everyone's being cagey. There's people asking about you, and it ain't a birthday present they've got in mind!”

“Who's asking?”

“No names, just blank faces and a lot of whispers. But there's no doubt about it. It's you they want. What's going on?”

Dave ignored the question and asked, “Yanks?”

“Rock Hudson look-alikes, I’d say. Clean cut, shiny suits, cowboy boots, flashing white teeth from here to Southend, know what I mean? They couldn’t be more obvious if they were wearing Stetsons, riding horses and shooting everything that moved.”

“Does the old man know?”

“Are you kidding? Tell me something going down in the Smoke that he doesn’t know about?”

“Has he said anything?”

“Only that you’re on holiday. He’s sent you away to dry out your liver, on doctor’s orders. It’s official. But everyone that counts knows it’s a load of bollocks.”

“Let’s keep it that way. It’ll blow over. Don’t worry. I’m keeping my head down for a while. Tell the boys to do the same. If you’ve got problems that can’t wait, then get in touch with Barry and he’ll let the old man know.”

“We could get hold of these geezers, Dave. Find out who’s asking the questions?”

“Blimey, don’t do that! I already know who it is. Just stay loose. I’ll be in touch.”

“Take care, Dave. I don’t like the sound of this.”

“I’ll make out. Just tell everyone to watch their backs.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Yeah.”

“See you.”

It was a relief to leave the kiosk and feel a breath of air. The sounds of the gentle waves washing in and the soulful cries from white birds that glided overhead enticed him over the bank of fine sand. He saw the horse first, about twenty yards from him, its thin reins hanging loosely, chestnut coat gleaming across its bare back. It stood head bowed, snorting. Behind the horse a trail of pits in the dry sand created a path to the damp firmer stuff at the water’s edge where the prints became more defined and trailed off across the beach.

The girls stood in the sea facing the horizon, calf deep until a swell and then the water lifted to the shoulders of the shortest and to the waist of Patricia Hughes. Dave was to discover later that since her divorce she’d reverted to her maiden name. They skipped and splashed. Their girlish yelps and laughter carried across to him. They seemed totally unaware of being watched. The four of them were naked, their clothes scattered across the beach. Dave’s breath was swept away as he watched, captivated, barely able to move. The bodies spanned perhaps thirty years but he would never have guessed it; the curves were as firm as they had ever been. He was looking at a

bunch of golden nymphs, semidivine guardians of nature itself. He could have enjoyed watching them play indefinitely but reserve, maybe a fear that they might discover him, turned him round.

On the road he emptied sand from his shoes and started back. He searched above the distant line of trees for signs of the helicopter but couldn't find it and guessed that it was retreating from the quickly approaching clouds. The sky had become dark and threatening with tufts of cloud breaking free and racing in from thicker stuff off the coast, casting moving shadows on the road ahead. He increased his pace. There was rain in the heavy air and beating it to the cottage would take some doing. The sound of hooves clattered behind him and he turned to see the woman. Her straw-coloured hair was wet and flattened even more by spectacles used as a headband. She'd dressed in a short thigh-length towelling robe. Looking directly ahead she manoeuvred the horse beside him. Her eyes sparkled in amusement. Or was it provocation? She seemed to know exactly how much he was unsettled and was intent on stringing it out. Her loose leg dangled freely beside him, perhaps a yard away, brushing the chestnut coat. Her robe, buttoned at the midriff, fell away either side exposing a blue wedge of bikini bottom against her pale skin. Dave pulled his gaze away and glanced up. There was a terrible glint in her eye. Without warning she kicked and moved ahead and the horse broke into a canter. He watched her round the bend, grateful that she had gone.

The first rumblings of thunder rippled ominously, forcing his pace, and when it died it left a hum of singing voices carried, presumably, from a wedding at the village church. He reached the cottage just as the first heavy splashes of rain dotted the ground.

The horse was tethered beneath the awning along the cottage wall. It backed around, stamping, unsettled by the approaching storm. Dave felt heady, adrenalin reached out to every nerve end. He was amazed by his own nervousness. He sensed the danger, a familiar feeling, and one that he normally enjoyed, and yet the warning signs tightened his chest, as if serious injury – even life itself – was on the line. Perhaps the knowledge that it was Cuddy Hughes' daughter made the difference. He pushed open the door and lifted the dimness inside. She faced him, framed in a brighter square of light, perched on the edge of the wooden table with her toes barely touching the stone floor, her hands gripping the top to hold her balance. Her spectacles lay on the table next to the pile of breakfast dishes. She was smiling at his expression or at the chorus of '*All Things Bright and Beautiful*' that the increasing breeze carried through the open door. Her bright eyes flickered. Her lips parted and her smile fluttered, first in apprehension and then to something else, perhaps a dare. The robe was undone exposing her long neck, the valley between her swollen breasts, her midriff with its faint gleam of down and the blue material beneath. With her back arched over the table, she threw out the final challenge, and the gap between her legs increased.

Her wet, salty mouth locked on to his. His hand moved instinctively between her legs, bringing a gasp from her mouth that sent hot air into his. Her legs clamped around his waist parting his way, dampening the material more than the sea. He tasted the seawater that trickled from her hair, eyes, nose and mouth, convinced that she would suffocate beneath him.

Lightning cracked out of the darkening sky and it thundered again with an almighty crash that shook every window in the cottage. Even the breakfast dishes rattled together and the milk bottle jumped. The tempest was on them, inside and out.

There was no tenderness in this coming together. He tore down her bikini bottom and she tore open his flies. She cried out and he grunted. It was brutish and they ended it on the floor, their chests heaving and their mouths open as they gulped for breath. The tablecloth had come down on top of them, splattering them with milk and cold coffee and preserve. For a while they lay, raw, unable to move, against the thick table legs on the cold stone tiles.

She whispered thickly, “That wasn’t making love. That was war.”

Across half a mile of countryside, getting fainter all the time, down the lane, across the garden and through the open door, fading to a murmur before it reached their ears, the vicar said, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,” and the congregation, “Amen.”

She stirred and stood, straddling him, gazing down at him through the strands of blond hair that fell over her face. Lumps of preserve became unstuck from her stomach and splattered on to him, spilt coffee and milk found its path southward through the dark curls and down her thighs. He looked up at her, at the display between her legs.

“They’re going to need a spaceship to get my bollocks back-” he began but was cut short.

She raised her finger and hushed him. He watched her move, still feeding on her movement, as she stepped across him and slipped on her robe. She picked up her bikini briefs and spectacles and without a backward glance went out of the cottage. He waited for the sounds of the horse on the tarmac, visualizing her nakedness on its back, thinking of the wet patch that would shortly stain the chestnut hair as she drained all that he’d put there.

While the bath filled Dave checked himself in the cracked mirror above the basin. His eyes were still red and fierce, still flushed by the victory. Her scent was trapped in the dried white flakes she’d left behind but this was going to go the way of the preserve and cold coffee. He drank a quarter of one of the bottles of scotch he’d purchased in the village and carried the remainder to the bath where he climbed gingerly into the hot water. Gradually the stinging disappeared leaving a positive glow and a feeling of drowsiness so heavy that it was difficult to move an arm.

The door opened and cut through the steam.

She stood in the doorway and leant against the frame. An expression of mild annoyance did not match the sparkle in her eye.

“I reached the corner and decided there was no way I could present myself like this. I thought of falling off the horse but that wouldn’t be convincing, would it? I mean, what on earth did I fall in to cover myself with marmalade and milk and for God’s sake, love bites? Look!” She swept back the robe to show a mark just below the elastic at the back of her briefs. “Not that I need an excuse, but it might raise Daddy’s eyebrows. He’s very old-fashioned and I’m not sure he

approves of you to begin with. Anyway, I didn't expect any of that. I look as though I've been through a war zone!" Her top lip was swollen and there was a red patch on her chin caused by his stubble. "Anyway, it's peeing down out there."

She didn't have to tell him. The rain was beating hard against the window.

She moved into the room and gave it the once over. "Oh my God, it's even worse than downstairs. Are you sure we won't catch something?" She dropped the robe and wriggled out of her bikini. "Move up," she said and climbed in, tap end. The water flushed over the side before it settled below the overflow. He noticed the skin beginning to redden around her dark nipples.

"Here." She handed him the flannel. "You do it. You caused it." There was a look in her eye that might have been affection. He hadn't noticed it before.

"You caused it Patricia. It was all down to you."

"Did I?" she countered. "You took my clothes off in the Royal Oak, and then again at the manor. James can get very jealous, you know, and you did make it pretty obvious. Even Daddy noticed it."

Dave shook his head. He'd have to watch these country folk. He grinned and said, "That was just wishful thinking. I never thought it would come to anything. What did you expect me to do?"

Even though the rain still pelted against the glass the cloud must have parted for sunlight tumbled in from the small square window high in the wall, shafting through the steam.

She said, "The storm is almost over."

"It could easily start again."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I saw you on the beach earlier, with the girls."

"We noticed. We saw you arrive."

He tried to hide his surprise and said, "They're all yours? You're in good nick for three kids."

"I'm in good nick period, if you don't mind."

He nodded agreement. "What happened to their dad?"

"We fell out."

"Does he see the kids?"

She shook her head and said, “He’s never seen Tracy. She’s six. We haven’t seen him since then. Daddy says we’ll never see him again. He probably paid him off.”

Dave nodded, hiding his thoughts. He wanted more but it wasn’t going to come.

Her glance flashed over the small room then settled back on him. “This room has a certain primitive charm but there’s a definite smell of mould.”

“That’s the laundry basket under the basin. Someone must have been keeping old socks in it.”

“Now you’ve ruined the picture. What’s wrong with the smell of the thatched roof after the rain?”

“What am I, a poet?”

“No, you’re a gangster.” A smile lit her face. She crossed her arms around her knees and leant back with her head between the taps. Beads of perspiration collected on her forehead. “In the pub you were staring at me. Apart from taking off my clothes what else were you thinking?”

“You looked out of place,” he said. His feelings were intense, sharpened by knowledge yet tempered by guilt. Or rather, he felt he should have felt guilty. He felt that he’d abused Cuddy Hughes’ hospitality.

She touched her breast and flinched, then examined the small nipple and the bruising. “You did that,” she said thickly.

“Yes.”

She laughed and reached for the bottle. The scotch burned and she coughed. She said, “God, I hate this stuff.” She eased her legs down between his and pressed him with her toes, her knees lowered sufficiently to reveal her hair broken by refraction. He grew against her foot. “Tell me about you?”

“I’m not married,” he said.

“I know that much.”

“I’m in the family business.”

“I know that too. What else?”

“I’ve got a flat in London, above one of the clubs. You might have heard of it – The Tower.”

She nodded. “Who hasn’t? What about girls?”

“There’s nothing about girls.”

“I’ve heard differently.”

“Who told you that?”

She smiled. Her front tooth was slightly crooked.

“What happened to the kids?” he asked.

“They took the short cut home. I had to bring Juliet, the horse, the long way. Tracy, Jackie and Jessica – Jessica’s the eldest. She’s twelve. Tracy is the apple in her granddad’s eye. She always has been. He makes up for absent fathers.”

Dave nodded reflectively. “I can’t picture Cuddy Hughes with kids on his knee.”

“You’d be surprised how domesticated my dad is. I took them all to London once, to see the shows, about two years ago. Tracy was too young really. We stayed at the Hilton overlooking Hyde Park. We had the penthouse suite.”

Dave studied her thoughtfully, wondering whether it was her way of telling him that she knew all about the American girl and the trouble that he was in. She hadn’t once asked what he was doing up here and it was the obvious question.

“Daddy takes us away twice a year,” she continued. “But he can’t get around like he used to so we’re a bit restricted with locations. Long hauls are a bit out of the question.”

“You’ve not thought of moving away? Getting a place of your own?”

“I’ve got as much freedom as I need. I’m thirty-four. Daddy accepts that. No questions. No restrictions. Discussions centre on the girls, their schooling and so on. He likes me to get out. He’d like me to meet someone.”

“He doesn’t like James.”

“Oh, I know that.” She raised her eyebrows. “James is all right.”

Dave threw her a quizzical look.

“He’s safe. He’s very rich, legitimately so, or at least his parents are, and he’s not likely to end up in prison or in some gutter with a knife in his back.”

“Sweetheart, you’re shooting in the dark. I’m not going to end up that way either.”

“Huh! You’re about as safe as safe sex the Catholic way! Have you ever seen the size of Irish families? That’s how Tracy arrived!”

She shivered. Perhaps the conversation had cooled her. The water was still hot.

Dave pulled the plug and led her to the bedroom to hunt out softer towels. She stood head bowed and let him dry her. He was gentle, particularly around the cuts on her knees. He knelt behind her, wiping her legs before drawing open the towel like a pair of curtains to reveal her trim behind. He felt an urge to bury his face between her as if devouring her would be the final satisfaction.

“You leave my bum alone,” she said. She turned around inside the towel. She held her legs closely together. Her slender hand did not entirely cover the extremities or the parting beneath. He let the towel fall. She moved her hand.

“You’re looking from a purely aesthetic point of view, of course?”

“I think so. What’s it mean?”

“It means that I’m going to fall over if you keep doing that.”

He picked her up easily and carried her to the bed.

He felt her tremble.

“Be tender with me this time,” she said.

They spent the following few days together. Even in that short time she seemed to have changed. She radiated; her complexion and her character smouldered as though fired by some inner furnace. It was impossible not to recognize the sparkle, the confidence, and the added spring to her step.

On Thursday she couldn’t make it; she was taking the children into Lincoln. Dave found himself in the bar of the Royal Oak again. He knew that it was a mistake and that he was going against the express wishes of Cuddy Hughes but things had moved on from there. It was lunchtime and the bar was surprisingly empty. The balding man served him and then went out to his cellars. He stood at the bar and considered finishing his drink quickly and getting out before any harm was done. The door opened. It was too late. And as soon as he recognized James Osbourne he knew it meant trouble.

Backed up by two friends, Osbourne walked directly up to Dave and said, “I want a word with you.”

Dave turned to face him and said, “What can I do for you?”

“I want to make it clear to you that Patricia and I have been seeing one another for quite some time and that we have an understanding.”

“Fine,” Dave said. “That’s quite clear. Is that it?”

“I want you to keep away from her. You have nothing in common; you do not fit in. Is all that absolutely plain enough for you?”

Dave shifted his glance to Osbourne’s friends who stood just behind. He gave them his best effort at a conciliatory smile. He didn’t need this. Cuddy had warned him. He was supposed to be lying low, keeping out of trouble. Backing down went against the grain. That upset him more than anything else. In normal circumstances Osbourne would already be chewing on the floorboards.

“There’s no need for any of this,” he said.

“I want your word that you’ll leave her alone.”

Dave sighed and said, “I’m sorry, my son, but you’re talking to the wrong person. If you have a future with Pat you should be discussing it with her, and not in public.”

“I’m not your son, Dave. And the discussion is with you. If you don’t mind we’ll leave Patricia out of it.”

Dave shrugged and turned back to the bar. He lifted his pint mug. James Osbourne prodded Dave’s arm and some of the drink splashed on to the bar surface. A dark veil drew across Dave’s eyes and he said, “Don’t do that.”

Osbourne prodded again.

“I’m talking to you,” he said loudly. “Do we have an understanding?”

Dave’s beer mug exploded on the side of James Osbourne’s face and sent him sprawling across table and chairs. Before he’d landed firmly on the floor and before his friends had moved, Dave’s shoe sank into his groin. It was over in seconds. Osbourne lay paralysed on his back as frothy blood poured from his mouth and nose.

Dave placed the handle of his pint mug on the bar and turned to the others. “I told him not to do it again.”

Open mouthed, they nodded in agreement, their shocked eyes fixed on Osbourne’s shattered face.

The barman appeared from the back and made suitable threats. As Dave left the bar the others rushed to aid their friend.

Dave anticipated the next move. He knew that the police wouldn’t get involved and he guessed that James Osbourne would cause no further trouble – Cuddy wouldn’t allow it – but he knew also that Cuddy wouldn’t let it rest there.

He was in the orchard when the car pulled up. The sun had just cleared the treetops to begin its dissipation of the early morning mist. Two men armed with shotguns left the black Rolls and called him over. The rear door was pushed open and Dave found Cuddy Hughes sitting stiffly in the seat, his cane held upright between his knees.

“Morning,” Dave said apprehensively while trying to gauge the man’s mood. It wasn’t good; he could tell that much from the tight lips and burning eyes. He wondered who would be mentioned first, Cuddy’s daughter or James Osbourne. He was more nervous at the prospect of hearing Patricia’s name than that of Osbourne’s. Even though he hadn’t seen Pat since the fight her scent was still about him; he drew it in with every breath, the musky scent of female sex, unmistakable and yet personalized, unique. It was in his nose and throat, in his hair. Cuddy couldn’t fail to recognize it.

“David, get in a while,” Cuddy said calmly.

The armed men spread out either side of the car, guns no longer broken, and he wasn’t convinced it was just a show of muscle. He climbed in and sat beside the diminutive figure.

“What’s happened?”

“You’ve happened. You’ve arrived in my village like World War Three!”

Dave studied his new adversary. “I’m sorry about what happened. Let’s cut straight to it, shall we?”

“I’m sorry too, Dave. You let me down. You let your father down. You seem to have some kind of death wish about you. You carry it around like a sign, neon lit. My feelings for your father are holding back what I’d like to say to you, but I’m surprised he hasn’t taught you self-control.”

“Is he all right?”

“James? All right? Well now, apart from his bollocks being somewhere in the next county and his front teeth chewing on his arsehole, I’d say he wasn’t too fucking tickled.”

Dave held on to a smile. Eventually he said, “I know about you, Mr Hughes. And I know that it’s only these last few years that have slowed you down. If someone came in and started pushing you around, you’d have killed the guy. There’d have been no second chances. I gave this guy every chance to back off. I was almost grovelling, for Christ sakes.”

“We’ve got nothing else to discuss,” Cuddy said coldly.

“Yes we have and it’s more important than James Osbourne or any other public school shit, no matter who his father is. These bastards only think they’re in charge.”

Cuddy threw up a hand and sighed. “I know what’s been going on. I’m not stupid. Even Patricia’s mother thinks she’s sniffing glue or swallowing pills by the handful.”

Dave's mouth was dry. Without realizing it he was digging his fingernails into his palms.

"I know that Patricia has obviously found some qualities in you that are attractive. Frankly, I have not. You don't actually inspire confidence, Dave. You came here with a heavy reputation, and your actions since then have given me no reason to doubt it. The reason you were sent here in the first place is because you think with your dick. Down south, so I'm told, there's a joke that Dave Smith would fuck anything in a skirt, including the odd Scot! You heard it? It's not very funny. I'm not laughing." He paused for a moment and then said, "If you're only good for one tenth of your reputation then you're not to be trusted within a mile of any woman. And by God, that includes my daughter!"

"These things are always exaggerated. It would take some kind of superman to do some of the things I've been accused of."

"Maybe," Cuddy said. "But when all this is over I'd like you to go back to London, put some space between you. If in three months you still have feelings for one another we can take it from there."

"I can't do that. Patricia isn't a girl anymore. She knows what she wants. And if she wants me it's going to take an army to keep me from her. If she doesn't want to see me I'll never bother her again. But she's going to tell me. Not you, Sir."

Cuddy raised an eyebrow in surprise. Suddenly he smiled and there was something approaching affection in his eyes.

"I'm going to leave it there for now, young man. There'll be no more visits to the village. Is that understood?"

Dave nodded.

The affection vanished. Cuddy grimaced and said, "I'll speak to my daughter."

Dave climbed out of the car and watched Cuddy's men get in and moments later the car roared off.

It rained through the afternoon and the weak light barely found its way into the cottage. Dave bathed early and towelled himself down while watching from the bedroom window for Patricia's arrival.

He was nervous at the prospect of meeting her again. It came down to violence and whether she thought his treatment of James Osbourne was justified. It came down to her attitude over the use of violence to settle an argument. He wondered how much she knew about her father's line of work and whether she accepted that it hadn't been his refined manners and his persuasive abilities over the conference table that had led him to the top. He wondered whether she accepted also that some men could never be pushed around, no matter what the consequences.

He heard the car before he saw it, a metallic BMW. It flashed past the short expanse of lane that he could see. A moment later came a screech of brakes. Two men in dark suits appeared at the entrance to the drive. The drizzle didn't seem to bother them as they looked around before walking almost nonchalantly toward the cottage. The black automatics they held seemed to cut holes through the dripping grey.

Dave was stunned. The implications were still sinking in as he saw the men duck for cover behind a low hedgerow, their attention directed toward the orchard.

Two flat explosions rattled the window. Dave leant closer to the glass to bring the orchard into view. Joe Daley stood under the trees, his raised shotgun smoking. He had already broken it and was bringing fresh cartridges from his pocket. He was standing there as if taking part in a pheasant shoot. Dave mouthed the words, "Get down for God's sake!" But even as the last word silently emerged he heard the clatter of automatic fire and watched Daley sink to the spongy ground. Bullets smacked into the mud around him. Tree bark ripped open. Daley lay still. His gun stuck in the earth and pointed at the low sky. Behind him a sow had her belly torn out. She squealed and slipped then slowly hauled herself from the mud and lumbered away, dragging guts behind her, barely concerned.

Dave moved. He put his weight against the old dressing table and pushed it against the door. He pulled his case from under the bed and tore into it, throwing his clothes aside until he found his .38, a black Smith & Wesson.

The front door crashed open. Glass smashed. He moved back to the window. A dozen coats of paint held it firm. The thump of footsteps sounded on the narrow stairs. He put his shoulder against the frame. The window cracked, the wood splintered, and it opened. The bedroom door thudded into the back of the dressing table. The opening in the window was barely wide enough to take him but he made it, and landed on the awning that ran along the side of the cottage.

The dressing table slid back and the door crashed open. A gun roared. The window smashed and showered him in glass. Dave fired one shot into the room before he lost his footing and skidded on the tin roof. Timber cracked as the awning caved in. He rolled over the lip and landed flat on his back on a freshly turned border. For a moment he lay winded, unable to move.

One of the men had remained at the cottage door and now he came charging around the corner. He was blond, about six-three. Jimmy's description flashed into Dave's mind. He was still lying on his back as he pulled the trigger. The man's blue eyes widened as he realized his mistake. The bullet caught him in the knee. He yelped, spun round and fell backwards, away from Dave. His 12-bore Spatz flew into the air. Dave fired again and saw a neat hole appear in the sole of the man's shoe.

A clatter of fire came from above. Bullets smacked the earth just a foot from Dave's head.

He struggled to his feet, shouting out loud as slivers of glass cut into him. The rain spread ragged tributaries of blood across his pale body. Keeping close to the side of the cottage he ran to the back.

An old fence extended from the side of the cottage across to the outhouses. It was rotten in parts but just about adequate to keep the pigs from wandering. Moving in a crouched position he splashed his way to the sheds. The goon who could still stand was going to have to make the same crossing to get to Dave and that wasn't going to be easy for him.

He crawled into the end shed and wedged open the door. It gave him a perfect view of the cottage.

The rain grew heavier. He began to shiver. Ten minutes went by.

“You'll hear from me mother fucker!” The voice came from the cottage. “There'll be another time, you can be sure of that!”

Minutes later he heard the car doors slam and then the engine. He stayed put for half an hour, until dusk began to fall, then he left the shed and keeping to the line of trees he circled the cottage to the road.

It was the better part of another hour before he chanced the cottage and in that time he examined it from every angle. Eventually he crawled in. He'd just finished checking the place over and was still naked when he heard another car draw to a halt. His heart sank. He pressed himself against the larder wall and held the gun to his chest.

“Dave! Dave!” Patricia's shout carried through the open door. She'd seen the smashed glass, perhaps even sniffed the cordite that still soured the heavy air. She threw on the light. As she saw him her face drained of colour.

He winked. “Hello, sweetheart,” he said and dropped the gun to his side.

“Are you shot? There's so much blood.”

He glanced down. He was covered in mud, head to toe, but in a number of places the mud had turned red.

“I don't think so. It's just a few cuts from the glass. But I'm hurting all over so it's a bit hard to tell.” He moved forward. She stayed motionless by the door. He switched off the light and pulled her away from the doorway before peering out into the darkness.

“What happened?”

“I don't know. I think Daley's had it. He's under the trees. Go and tell your dad what you've seen, will you? He'll know what to do. Stay here till I get to the road then I'll cover you.” He started toward the door.

“You're coming with me,” she said sternly. “If you think I'm leaving you like this you must be joking.”

He nodded, too shattered to argue. “Give me a minute,” he said. “I’ll put on some clothes.”

“You better. Daddy’s very particular about that sort of thing.” She turned up her nose. “You could use a good deodorant, while you’re at it.”

Dave moved into the manor house. A doctor came out to check him over and sew some stitches. Once he’d gone Cuddy admitted sheepishly, “There’s a squealer. North or south I don’t know. I’ll check my end. I imagine your father will do the same in London. It must be someone pretty damned close. Apparently they had a fucking helicopter out.” He glanced up to see the surprise in Patricia’s eyes. He rarely swore in front of the women. “Sorry, baby, but you can’t trust anybody nowadays!”

Patricia filled Dave’s glass with malt. She ignored her father’s. “You were lucky,” Cuddy told him, obviously upset that security on his manor had been breached. “I told you to stay low, didn’t I?” It was the closest Cuddy could get to an apology. And it wasn’t even necessary.

The attack spurred Dave’s father into overdrive. He gave the Americans a foothold in the London casinos where they could clean up their dollar bills – something they’d been hankering after for years. Two days later Cuddy came down to say, “I’ve heard from your father. He’s had to make concessions to get you off the hook, but it’s done. The contracts are cancelled. He wants you home.” He finished. That was it. He walked past the two of them into his study and closed the two large doors behind him.

Patricia turned to him. “Before I came to the cottage that night I went to see James at the hospital. His jaw is wired up. He looks dreadful. I decided then that I didn’t want to see you again. I was coming to tell you.”

Dave nodded. “What changed your mind?”

“Daddy spoke to me while you were with the doctor.”

Dave couldn’t hide his surprise.

“He told me that James got what he deserved, that there were three

of them, that he wouldn’t have been pushed around either. He told me that in our family, as it is in yours, there’s always going to be people who might have a go, that to be safe we need to be around people who are stronger than they are.”

She carried her glass across to him and sat on his lap. She stroked his hair back and kissed him. The drink she held up threatened to spill. “I must be mad getting mixed up with you,” she said lightly. “Daddy told me what you said to him. About it being my decision and not his. And if I made the right one it would take an army to stop you coming for me. Not many people stand up to my father.”

“Well, is it down to you, or not?”

“Of course I make my own decisions.”

“Well, I’m running out of time up here so you’ve got another one to make.”

“I wondered about that. It would be like the marriage of two Royal Families – two manors.”

“Who said anything about getting married?”

“I did,” she said. “You don’t think I’d live with you without a ring, do you? Daddy’s very particular about things like that.”

He reached forward to touch her glass with his and said, “Well then, in that case, I’m not going to argue.”

She tasted the malt. “I hate this stuff,” she said.

Three months later, before a vast reception with Patricia’s three daughters acting as bridesmaids, Dave and Pat were married under the cold Saxon stone of St Mary’s, the village church, by the Reverend Peter Ricketts, a close friend of Cuddy Hughes. His prayers were for David and Patricia and for every member of the united congregation. The union was blessed.

Chapter 4

1986

The Americans had lived in England long enough to have been forgotten by the society they left behind but barely long enough to feel accepted by the new. Their absence was no longer conspicuous; Sharon’s parents were dead and Tony had lost any claim to the rung of the ladder he might have been on. Cocaine had been his downfall; that and booze, and it had led to him being sent to England to work under O’Connell, even though O’Connell was old enough to drop at any moment. Tony considered it a punishment, a kind of exile. If he was remembered at all then it was as an example to young upstarts: ‘You don’t let personal matters jeopardize business,’ and, ‘If you don’t control your temper you’ll end up like Tony Valenti!’

In the UK, the capital of the Old World, he was still an outsider. He paid the taxes and the rates and was generous to strange charities. He attended the local church and the small community fêtes. In some ways the quieter pace of life suited him. The feeling of safety was in itself a rare pleasure. But he was still an outsider. There was an unspoken complicity between the British – the English in particular – that other races were inferior. Their ancestry had left them with a patronizing attitude, a discipline and a restraint that you had to see to believe; even the down-and-outs in Central London had more style, certainly more manners, than their New World contemporaries. Even the down-and-outs queued for Christ sakes! The English had a magnificent

capacity to ignore anything remotely disagreeable – and to them foreigners were just that. The English were...insular, of an island. And the whole goddamned island could fit inside Iowa or North Carolina!

Approaching the UK at the rate of one mile every two and a half seconds, O'Connell raised his voice to counter Concorde's continuous roar.

"We've lived here five years, Tony, and you still don't know what the place is famous for?"

Tony Valenti's sharp features remained blank. "Well, it ain't their teeth, and that's for sure." He shrugged and offered, "Rhododendrons?"

O'Connell sighed and said disappointedly, "Magna Carta. Runnymede! The Magna Carta!"

"Oh yeah, remind me what that is again?"

"It's serious shit, Tony, trial by jury and all that political crap."

"Yeah, I remember now."

"Let me tell you something. We've got a lot to thank the barony for. You can't get to judges like you can get to juries." The old man chuckled. "King fucking John didn't know he was signing us into power!" He paused before adding, "The grandchildren were telling me all about it. They're doing it at school." He sighed reflectively and nodded. "They've got pages of the stuff, kings and queens, castles and knights and all that crap, and stickers you've got to stick on them. Those kids give me a lot of pleasure in my old age." He turned to the scarred leathery features of Tony Valenti. "It's a shame you never had kids, Tony. Everyone should have kids."

The old man knew only too well why Tony and Sharon had remained childless. After Sharon had been caught cheating Tony had knocked her about. The finest doctors in the world agreed that she could never have children, that the damage was too severe. O'Connell himself had tried to talk Tony into a divorce but he wouldn't have it. Valenti was besotted with his wife, children or no children. Just so long as she didn't do it again.

"It was good to see the old faces again," O'Connell said reflectively.

Tony Valenti didn't agree. He'd been acutely embarrassed by the looks of contempt that they thought were hidden from him, and the way in which his old friends had pointedly ignored him. They'd treated him like so much shit on the sidewalk and had given him the widest possible berth. He'd been hugely relieved to get back on to the plane.

O'Connell went on, "I wish I could have stayed longer. When you get to my age whenever you leave the Big Apple you wonder if you'll ever see the place again. That's something you can promise me, Tony. If I die in the rain over there..." He indicated forward. "...I want my body freighted back to Manhattan."

“You got it,” Tony muttered but his thoughts were racing back to the meeting they’d attended earlier in the day.

As it was with the majority of families, relationships were occasionally strained. In this respect the Americans and their relatives in Sicily and Naples and Calabria were no different. And as with most families the patriarchs – in this case they were out of the Cosa Nostra and Camorra – showed their issue tolerance and understanding. In return they expected loyalty and respect. They received both in large measure.

The Europeans had reached an agreement with the Colombian cocaine cartels by threatening to kill all their couriers. When the body count reached double figures, El Papa had agreed to talk. The link gave the Mafia exclusive rights to the two billion annual trade and their American relatives were given the job of handling it. With the increased supplies and vast fortunes tied up it was imperative that new markets were found. Mainland Europe was the obvious target, especially with the opening up of the Common Market frontiers already on the drawing board. Eventually their attention turned to the UK.

The Americans were already established in England. They’d been drawn like flies to horse shit by the wide-open gambling laws. They owned houses on the banks of the river at Runnymede. Their business in the UK still centred on gaming and its associated money laundering that cleaned enormous amounts of US and Canadian dollars. Heading up the UK end was O’Connell and he was summoned to meet the heads of the families in New York. He took Tony Valenti along for the ride, and to carry his bag.

Concluding his report to the leaders, O’Connell had said, “Under a thousand kilos were seized last year, mostly by Customs, mostly from the assholes on the Continent. They’re not even scraping the surface. The imports are basically split into four: through Liverpool, mostly from the Crescent, and that’s handled by a local gang, the Scousers, run by Vic Hannington; through the main airports, Heathrow and Gatwick, by John Bracey. A guy named Stafford Carr runs Hull. That’s another port on the other side to Liverpool. He imports through Holland, and then the freelance, mostly dropped off the top of Scotland around the islands and then picked up by the trawlers. That’s the import picture as near as you’ll get. As far as distribution is concerned the place is split between southern England run by the Chinese, and Mick McGovern who runs Scotland. Between the two is a buffer zone controlled by various smaller gangs. The Chinks deal under the protection of the main London gang, the Smiths. There’s an agreement between them that goes way back. My feeling is that in ten years or so, when the heavies move out of Hong Kong, the Chinks will want to expand. That’s the picture but it isn’t the whole story. Things are pretty unstable over there at the moment. Mick McGovern who runs Scotland is keen to expand southward. One of the guys he wants to move in on, Cuddy Hughes, is related to the Smiths. His daughter married the eldest son. The Scousers from Liverpool are making noises and threatening to join McGovern. The whole situation is likely to blow, maybe turn into a full-scale war. If it does then someone is going to have to pick up the pieces.”

From the shadows a voice of authority spoke quietly.

“The Smith’s organization is best suited for what we’ve got in mind: a nationwide distribution. We need to pressure them into ending their agreement with the Chinese. Stafford Carr can be closed down easily. His shipments from Holland will be cut immediately. The Liverpool end is more difficult. We’ll work on it. It might be that Vic Hannington takes a long vacation. For the moment we’ll live with the airports and Bracey. At the end of the day he’ll fall in line. If we open up negotiations with McGovern and make the Smiths aware of it, then they’ll come around to our way of thinking. Is that a problem?”

“No problem,” O’Connell said.

“What about you, Tony? I know it’s a long time ago but these things don’t go away.”

Tony Valenti nodded sullenly and said, “I had a run-in with the Smith’s eldest son. It was ten years ago. You all know what happened. He screwed about with my wife. I don’t hold any grievances. Business is business. I put my wife in the picture and she ain’t likely to do it again!”

Around the table the men nodded their approval.

“Business is business,” Valenti repeated. “And if you consider that the Smiths are good for us then that’s good enough for me.” He lied, of course, but he was totally convincing.

“That’s a wrap then,” the leader said softly. “Let’s get to work.”

Roaring towards Heathrow at over twice the speed of sound, Tony Valenti thought about the meeting. His expression didn’t alter as he considered the irony that after all this time his family wanted to embrace the people he hated more than anything in the world. And yet behind the insult lay a flicker of hope. It was just possible that in the ensuing struggle for control of the UK underworld – World War Three, Goddamnit – he would find his chance for retribution.

He glanced at the old man beside him.

“What is it?” O’Connell growled sleepily.

“Nothing,” Valenti murmured, “nothing at all.”

Chapter 5

Some three hundred and fifty miles north of Heathrow where the Americans had landed a fortnight before, men waited at another airport. They wandered down queues made ragged by a jumble of luggage to scrutinize the features of unsuspecting men, yet in their search they remained anonymous, hardly noticeable. Anonymity was the mark of their profession. They heard the roar of planes dropping from the low bank of dense cloud and they heard the distorted

voices heavy with Glaswegian accent resounding from the speakers, unclear in the vast ringing hall. The various sounds of engines and vehicles and nervous chatter did not distract them.

Since mid-morning they had waited. They'd watched the queues shorten and lengthen, seen the small family dramas played out, seen a man argue with his wife, seen a dozen children thumped for getting in the way, seen a lost child consoled by a couple of WPCs, seen porters making their tips and plastic cups fill every available surface, and now, under the stark fluorescent strip they watched the cleaners mopping between the groups of night-time travellers, the holiday-makers doing it on the cheap. Bedraggled, fatigued people dosed down in makeshift beds, small children lay limply in the sagging arms of their parents or lolled in their pushchairs and eyes became sore and vacant and less excited. The planes kept arriving and departing, the automatic board kept flicking and the public-address voice kept ringing.

Men waited and watched, drank coffee out of plastic cups and smoked endless cigarettes. Eventually they made a telephone call. They heard that he hadn't been found in any of the stations or depots or car-hire firms and they guessed that he'd found a lift south. All was not lost, however, for men were now watching the motorway and waiting at service stations as far south as the Midlands.

All morning a great mass of cloud had moved in off the Atlantic, drawing a darker colour across the land and, by mid-afternoon, the ceiling was low and dense, bringing forward the dusk. At first the rain was heavy, blurring the dark shadows and the arcs of light thrown from the street lamps; now it was gentle and constant, filtering into the spongy earth.

The weather suited Tommy Smith; no one was going to notice a man with his lapels pulled up to hide his face. People became anonymous in wet weather, heads down, collars up, hugging shop doorways for shelter, even the colour of clothes and hair darkened to a likeness by saturation. His problem was the scarcity of other faces. Now that the pubs and clubs were closing the weather was forcing the stragglers indoors. It wouldn't be long before he was a lonely figure on the road, easily seen and just as easily picked up. The police stopping him would be bad enough for Mick's influence had reached the northern cities, but if Mick's people got to him first then he was finished. His options were disappearing. In the next half hour or so he had to get a lift or he had to steal a car. And stealing a car to drive the length of the country all in one go was going to be pretty chancy even on such a night.

Tommy glanced again at his watch. The articulated lorry that had roared down the M6 cutting through the surface water had dropped him ten minutes earlier. Since then he'd smoked two cigarettes while studying the bright entrance of a service station from between the comparative shelter of two tightly parked container lorries. Beyond the lorry park where the two giants stood in isolation, bathed in a veil of rain and darkness so that only their massive silhouettes were visible, a row of cars were parked neatly in the white painted rectangles, shiny skins glinting in reflected light as the water droplets collected together and zigzagged in crazy patterns across them. Four powerful bikes decked in superfluous chrome, angled on their parking rests, were parked haphazardly next to the cars and immediately outside the entrance, parked in the no-parking area, an empty motorway patrol car stood with its doors unlocked.

The wind increased and swept water from the top of the containers. For a few moments Tommy was pelted with heavy drops and he was conscious of the rain seeping through to his shirt. He started from the darkness between the massive trucks just as the overnight coach from Glasgow pulled in, and he was glad to mix with the stream of passengers as they filed from the coach, stepping between the deeper pools of spitting water, to the welcome of the unflattering lights of the cafeteria.

Tommy moved along a ragged queue towards a cluttered stainless steel counter. In front of him a line of people shuffled forward to order their teas and coffees, stretching their stiff and weary bodies. The queues to the toilets grew around the edge of the room; people danced from one foot to the other. He reached the counter.

“An all-night breakfast please, and coffee.”

A woman serving half smiled, perhaps at his accent: London, born and bred. She said, “It’s an all-day breakfast, Love, but we serve it all night as well. Can you wait a minute?” She nodded toward the queue from the coach. “I’ll do your coffee.”

She was tasty, something to take the mind off the journey and the depression outside. Her spotless wraparound parted occasionally hinting that she wore no skirt beneath. There was a promise there, one that would never be kept.

He nodded silently and took his drink to a stand-up counter. The tables were full.

The queues for the toilets dwindled and those people who needed to use them again lined up again, hoping to make it before the coach driver got to his feet. In a few minutes more the vast room had all but emptied. Chairs blocked the gangways between tables full of empty crisp packets and brimming ashtrays and spills of tea and coffee. A couple of youngsters appeared and began to clear away. Coach parties: twenty quid spent between them and the place left looking like the Liverpool football supporters had held a stag night.

Tommy noticed two uniformed policemen as they moved from their corner table. For just an instant one of them looked his way and he felt certain that he’d been recognized. As their eyes locked the policeman looked away and called to the woman behind the counter, “See you, Liz.” She waved an acknowledgement at the swinging door. Tommy watched the policemen run through the rain to their car. In a moment a plume of smoke phut-phutted from the exhaust and the headlamps produced two explosions of light in the dark. The rain fizzed in the beams.

On the speakers the Bangles faded out and the Pet Shop Boys took over.

Tommy turned back from the window to check who was left in the cafeteria: half-a-dozen leather-clad bikers, three couples, one with a sleeping baby, an old man, two lorry drivers and a skinny girl who looked like she was on the game.

The waitress weaved toward him carrying his breakfast. She wiped over the surface of a table and laid down the plate.

“OK,” she asked as he sat down.

“Looks good,” he said quietly.

She paused by his table and unconsciously patted the back of her hair that was neatly clipped under a white cap. Her breasts rose against her smock. He smiled at her, almost knowingly, and she hesitated. For a moment she wondered if the term Cockney came from the word cocky.

“Cheeky sod,” she said, “Sauce?”

“No, this is fine.”

“That’s good. You’ve got enough of that already.”

He watched her make her way back to the counter. She’d coloured slightly, conscious that his eyes were on her. He concentrated on his breakfast. He hadn’t eaten anything for over twelve hours. Lunchtime seemed a lifetime ago.

A tall young man who’d arrived on his own picked up his cup and turned to find a table. He chose one close to Tommy away from the Hell’s Angels, and carefully set down his drink before pulling back a chair and easing into it.

He was gaunt and pale and his eyes were sunken under a mop of limp, brown hair. Tommy noticed the frayed cuffs and the scuffed and holed shoes. He saw the cup lifting unsteadily and the man’s glazed eyes on the fried bread that Tommy had left at the side of his plate.

“You finished with that?”

Tommy’s blue eyes narrowed before losing their steel.

“You want it?”

He nodded, “If it’s all the same to you. I ain’t eaten a thing since breakfast, kind of shaky.”

“It’s bad for you. Full of cholesterol.”

“So’s starving.” He wiped egg yoke and grease from the plate. “But people still starve.” He wiped his lips on his sleeve and gulped at his tea.

“Saw you drive in. It’s a bad night for travelling.”

“I ain’t doing it for pleasure.”

“Going south?”

“No choice.”

“Birmingham?”

“Further, maybe, if the petrol holds out.”

“Out of dough?”

The man pulled a face. “That’s right, out of luck, out of fags, and out of dough.”

“Times are hard.” Tommy tossed over a cigarette and stretched across to light it. The thin man drew smoke deeply and coughed.

“Ta,” he said and sniffed. “You’re from the south, right, London, right?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s where I’m going, if the petrol’ll get me there.”

“Car might not make it. What is it, seventy, seventy-one?”

“Two point three, seventy-three, goes like a pissing bomb. Trouble is she eats the juice.”

“You still hungry?”

“No, I’m all right now.” He drew on the cigarette again and coughed again.

“Could you use some dough?”

“What’s your game?”

“I’m looking for a lift. I’ll pay you.”

The man frowned. “What, you break down or something?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Well, what about the petrol?”

“I’ll get that.”

“That’ll do me then, no questions asked.”

“There’s something else.”

The thin man scratched his forehead with dirty nails, waiting for the catch.

“People are looking for me. They’re not the best. And I might have been recognised in here. I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Cops?”

“No, just competition, but it could turn nasty. If you went to your car, made to pull out then stop at the entrance, I’ll hop in and off we go. It’s got to be worth a ton if you get us to London.”

The man frowned, “One hundred pound?”

Tommy remained expressionless. He lit another cigarette.

“A hundred quid,” the other repeated, this time as a statement. “I don’t need trouble but I can’t turn that away. All right, I’ll get you there.” He looked up suspiciously. “Half now, so I know you ain’t going to leg it. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Tommy Smith.”

“The footballer,” he nodded, “Liverpool, right?”

“Leave it out. I’m not that bleedin’ old!”

“Give us another fag then, and tell me what to do.”

“How much petrol have you got in the tank?”

“About two and a half gallons, maybe three.”

“Stone the crows! That won’t get us half way to Brum never mind the Smoke.” He reached for his wallet. “Here, here’s a score. Fill her up. What about oil and water?”

“She’s all right. I checked her this morning.”

“OK. You know what to do?”

The other nodded. “Right, my name’s Roy Alexander.”

“I’ll buy some more fags and a couple of rolls for you. When I see you outside the door I’ll make a move.”

He counted out five tens and added them to the twenty. “I’ll give you the rest when we reach the Smoke.”

“Right,” Roy said. He took the money and stood up. “Be ready then,” he said excitedly. He reached the door before he stopped and called back, “Cheese and tomato.”

The others in the room looked his way.

“The rolls,” he grinned, “make them cheese and tomato.”

“Right,” Tommy nodded anxiously. He could have done without the advertising. He watched the car splutter into life and the wipers arcing across the glistening windshield. The headlamps, one dimmed, glared as the car moved off toward the garage. Tommy moved to the counter and paid for his meal. He bought the rolls and cigarettes and stuffed them into his leather pocket. He left the shrapnel out of a tenner on the counter.

“Come again,” Liz said and gave him a smile she usually reserved for her drivers.

“I’d like to,” he said and returned the knowing glance that meant nothing at all.

“Cheeky sod,” she said.

Chapter 6

Starting at Carlisle the M6 cut a deep concrete groove through the Lake District and Forest of Bowland and snaked its way through the counties of Cumbria, Lancashire and Cheshire, slicing through the buffer zone of the divide and, on it, the dipped headlamps flashed in both directions boring through the incessant wall of rain. Bonnets and exhausts steamed, engines rattled and tyres whined as they sent up curtains of spray.

Roy Alexander was a good driver, alert, steady and fast. He unwrapped one of the rolls from its cellophane cover while his other hand remained firmly on the wheel. He kept to a steady sixty and cruised twenty yards behind a BOC tanker so that the spray fell before he was on it. The windshield-wipers worked overtime against the flood. Tomato juice full of seed trickled down his chin and he wiped it on his sleeve.

“Don’t know if anyone’s following or not,” he said with his mouth full. He studied the flashing lights in the mirror.

“Just concentrate on the road,” Tommy muttered.

“Been up here long?”

“Just a couple of days.”

“Come by train then, eh?”

“No, I motored up on Sunday. I had to leave it.” The answer came with the flare of a cigarette lighter. “You want one of these?”

Roy finished his roll and took the cigarette. He kept his eyes on the road as he bent to receive a light.

“Accident or busted down?”

“Neither.”

Roy’s disappointment was obvious even in the dark. After a moment he said, “Well, it’s none of my business. If you don’t want to talk about it, fair enough. Should know what we’re up against, though. If we’re being followed, I should know about it, that’s all.”

Tommy sighed and relented, “My old man’s got business interests up north. I’ve been up there to sort things. He got ill earlier in the week and yesterday they got wind of it, that he was rushed into hospital. With him out of action they’re trying to opt out of the deal.”

“Business troubles! When you said about getting hurt I thought you meant like, really hurt.”

Tommy chuckled but there was little humour about it. He said, “These Scottish bleeders have been known to cut up rough. They take their business seriously.”

“What kind of business you in?”

“Entertainments mostly, consumer goods and entertainment.”

“Luxuries! Ain’t much call for luxuries up this way, not any more. That’s why I’m going south. Got to. No choice.”

“How long have you been out of work?”

“Three years now. Got a wife and kids, two kids. Never thought anyone would go hungry in this country. Didn’t think they allowed it. This month we’ve been hungry. The kids are starting to get ill ‘cos of it. They get school meals on the social but they’re cutting them back and, anyway, they don’t help during the school hols. I’ve already cut everything out till there ain’t no more to cut. And you have to choose between hot water and food. What we had before and what we had to sell kept us going along with the handouts. But it’s been over a year and what we had before is all gone now so I got nothing else to sell. And things are wearing out, all together it seems. I know you don’t have to have a washing machine or a fridge, but Christ, things ain’t geared up to not having them. Not today. Now the heating in the house is bugged and I need a new tank. The bastards ain’t going to give me one either. They say the insurance should cover it and the insurance people say it don’t. Who the hell do you fight? To be honest with you, I’m all out of fight.”

“You could sell up.”

“You’re joking, right? There’s millions in the same boat as me. Don’t tell me you believe these bleeding figures on *out of work*? They talked us into buying, right? And then they took away our jobs.”

“Never given it much thought. Never did believe anything the politicians said.”

“House prices have hit rock bottom up here. If I sold out now I’d owe more on it than I’d get. And where the hell am I going to put the family? Council don’t want to know. They got people camping on their doorsteps. Not only that, they’d have the bleeding kids off you soon as look at you. We’ve got no rights today, nothing. The right to starve, that’s all. I’ve got to get a job. That’s why I’m travelling. There’s work down south. Anyway, you’ve got your own problems. Your old man’s in hospital.”

He sensed Tommy’s nod.

“Hope it’s not serious. I remember losing my old man about five years ago. Heart attack. Went over in the middle of Sainsbury’s. We all said it was the bloody cost of food that caused it, the bloody government taking us into the Common Market. What a bleeding con job that was. Never went shopping, my old man. Mum always did all that. But she was a bugger. Moaned and groaned after him non-stop to give her more housekeeping, said he hadn’t got a clue how much she spent on the weekly shop. So this day, Saturday it was, ‘cos he was going on from there to see Carlisle play Oldham, she went off to buy some cheese – he liked his old cheese on toast in an evening – and left him looking at the meat counter. When she came back there was a crowd there and he was on the floor. Went over just like that. One minute himself, the next gone. I’m glad he ain’t alive today to see us like this, though. He would have gone spare thinking of my girl going out with great holes in her shoes. I think that would have killed him anyway!”

The next few minutes were coated in silence. The rain was easing a little and through it the orange glow of village streetlights cut through the darkness.

“People in work ain’t got a clue how we’re living. That’s the trouble. The highlight of the week is the *TV Times* coming out on a Wednesday. Our TV’s busted now and I think that’s what broke the back of it. My old girl’s been pretty good. She’s been cleaning and taking in washing and she ain’t moaned but when that TV busted she just sat there and cried. She put up with the shit ‘cos I can’t afford the decorating, and she put up with the hand-me-downs and not going no place but when that screen went dead she folded up. It was then I decided to get on my bike. I left her with a few quid, enough for a week, put a tenner in the tank and took off. I’ll send this hundred quid to her all right, and that’ll cheer her up. By Christ it will! I’ll send it first post tomorrow. I’d like to see her face, mind. Got a good mind to drop you off then turn around and hand it to her personally, so I can see her.”

“Put it in the post, my son. You’ll be all right.”

Roy felt warmed by the conversation, lifted from his isolation. “I hope you’re right, mister, ‘cos I’m running out of ideas and I never had many to start with.”

The road ahead began its sweep between the cities of Manchester and Liverpool. The tanker blinked and moved across to the slip road and Roy edged the Victor slowly up to the back of a container lorry. Spray splattered the windshield, fanning off the giant square of rippling canvas in front. He eased back slightly and considered overtaking, instinctively glancing in his mirror. Two pools of light, full beam, exploded in the glass and slid to the right as the car behind accelerated to overtake. Roy pulled back into his own lane and glanced sideways as the dark sinister shape of a Jaguar slipped by. From the passenger seat a blurred face turned their way.

Roy grunted, "That him?"

"Could be. Something's caught his eye, or maybe he just fancies you."

Roy tightened his grip on the wheel and eased into the fast lane again and watched the tail-lights of the Jaguar growing dimmer until they vanished into the curtain of rain. He slipped back behind the shelter of the lorry.

"Maybe we're just getting paranoid."

Tommy wasn't so sure. He sat forward, suddenly alert. He muttered, "It was better to have him behind. While he's up front he could lay something on."

"Glad I'm not in the entertainment business," Roy said. Without understanding it he sensed the danger. "There's another exit coming up. Shall I take it?"

"No. If we tuck up behind him he'll have less chance."

"They cut up rough in the boardrooms then?"

Tommy grinned.

"Course, I always knew there was no difference between the big businessman and the criminal. Come to think of it, the politicians too. That much stands to reason. They're the criminals because they have the power to do something about it and they don't. But what can you do? When the kids are starving you got to do something, right? Don't let the bastards get you down, right? But there are too many bastards in this country now; everyone's looking after number one. How do you fight that?"

"Listen," Tommy began quietly. "Forget the propaganda; virtue never was a step up to heaven's door and suffering in silence never did anyone any good." More forcefully he went on, "I'll tell you how you do it, my son. You make a noise and you keep making it till someone listens. It's the only thing anyone understands. My kids aren't starving. I haven't got any kids. But if I did and they were because some official bastard wanted it that way, then I'd climb over their counters and tear their heads off!"

"I believe you. But some of us ain't strong enough to do that."

“When you get mad enough you’ll do it.”

“Maybe you’re right, maybe not.”

“Listen, there’s trouble all over. There’s always going to be someone who wants your share and there’s only one thing to do. You fight back. You hurt the bastard so much that he’ll never come back again. You make him realize that if he even thinks about upsetting you he’s never going to look the same again. And if you can make him really believe that, you’d be surprised at how accommodating he suddenly gets.”

“Does that include the police?”

“The filth? Yeah, kozzers included, even the Queen of England if she comes round to threaten my family. I don’t condone anyone getting hurt that doesn’t deserve it. But some people are born different, they want to make trouble, they want what’s yours.”

“I hear it but I don’t like it. I ain’t into violence and I don’t want my kids to be. I’d sooner walk away from trouble. There’s got to be some other way.”

“Let me know when you find it.”

The night grew darker and the air in the car became hot and dry. Altrincham, Crewe, Stoke, Stafford, came and went, the great sprawling metropolis of the Midlands, Birmingham, was negotiated and that was the M6. They skirted Coventry and Rugby and joined the M1 and the new signs flashed Northampton and London.

The small hours crept by, the unreal time when noises seemed duller and moves made in slow motion. The traffic had dwindled and most of it consisted of lorries and coaches. The speed limits became irrelevant and plumes of spray hung behind the roaring wheels. Out of the eastern sky a pale ghost of iron-grey cloud touched the darkness.

“Maybe he’s packed it in,” Roy said as he fought for concentration and accelerated past another flapping canvas. His passenger stirred. The farther south they had come the safer Tommy felt. He’d considered the possibilities a dozen times.

If Mad Mick had been going to hit them then he would do so on the M6 and when that hadn’t happened it would be before Northampton, and then Newport Pagnall, and now it had to be before Luton. Even Mad Mick wouldn’t venture to the steps of London. That meant that at some stage in the next few minutes the move would be made. He lit two cigarettes and passed one over. Roy sensed the sudden alertness in his passenger and gripped the wheel tighter. His body coiled slightly, expectantly.

“OK, I’m ready!”

Tommy nodded.

They passed the slips to Bedford and then Dunstable, examining every vehicle they overtook. The sky was fingered with grey and without them realizing it the surroundings had picked up a monotone form. The pale light intensified and things found their drab colour. The low cloud stretched in every direction. Luton went by and for the first time in over twelve hours, since the moment he had watched the news on the television in his hotel bedroom, Tommy allowed himself a moment's relaxation. For some reason Mad Mick had called off his men. The exits for St Albans and Watford were quiet.

"I'd like to get to see the studios," Roy said. "See them making the films, eh? Maybe get some work there. That would be something." He'd seen the Elstree sign. He glanced at Tommy and winked. "We made it. You're home. Told you she'd make it. Goes like a pissing rocket, don't she?" He rubbed his neck and swallowed sorely. "I could murder a cuppa."

"You're right, my son. You've done well. Take the next slip. There's a place we can get a drink and a brush-up just off Apex."

"I never had any doubt that she'd make it. She might rattle a bit, some of the body falls off sometimes, but she's a fighter. She'll give you everything she's got. She's one of the greatest cars ever made." A large sign approached indicating Mill Hill and Edgware. Roy sat up straighter. "I get quiet excited at seeing London, like a kid."

"You've been before?"

"Came down for a weekend when I was twelve. We came by coach. Saw the Palace and the Planetarium."

Tommy grunted his disapproval. "They say the world's getting smaller but for some people it isn't. You can fly to New York in the time it's taken to drive from Manchester and you've never even seen the Smoke."

"Did the Tower, saw the jewels."

"Well, that's all right then." Tommy shook his head. "I mean, even I haven't seen the jewels!"

Something hit the windshield. Crystals of glass sprayed in with a sudden rush of cold air and water. The remaining screen milked in a crazy jigsaw and then broke into a thousand pieces that thudded into the car. Wind and rain lashed in and almost lifted the car. Instinctively Roy's foot was on the brake; the wheels screamed, the car slewed sideways and moved inexorably toward the cavernous underside and monstrous wheels of a huge articulated lorry. The nearside rear window shattered and Roy heard something crashing about his head. He watched horrified as the bonnet ripped open and sparks flew towards him. A burning sensation swept down his side and his gasp for breath left him doubled in agony. His left arm, limp and useless, dropped from the wheel, and the car lurched closer to the truck. The rear end touched and the kickback sent the Victor spinning. It turned full circle behind the lorry and rumbled and tore at the metal barrier dividing north and south. Lorries and coaches swerved to miss them, sparks flew and tyres

screached. Tommy released his belt and grabbed hold of the wheel. He screamed above the roar of noise.

“Get her over! Don’t stop!”

Roy understood and ran the car on to the hard shoulder. He kept his head low to keep the rain from blinding him.

“Keep her going,” Tommy shouted. “There’s a turn about a hundred yards ahead.”

The Victor didn’t make it. The rear wheel buckled and they ran on the rim. The shaking bonnet bent upward at a crazy angle and threatened to fly off altogether. They ground to a halt twenty yards short of the slip road. Vehicles thudded past.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Tommy shouted. “Are you all right?” He saw the red stain spreading out on Roy’s shirt and realised it was a stupid question.

“I don’t know. I’m shaking like a leaf. I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Save it till later. That wasn’t a stone that hit us back there. We’ve got to leg it.”

He opened the door, stepped out on to the wet surface and peered up the road between the oncoming vehicles with their pale orange headlamps bearing down, at the deep ridges cut into the barrier. He ran around the front of the car and caught hold of Roy as he staggered from his seat. A streak of blood trickled from Roy’s hairline and thinned with the rain to run quickly down the side of his face. Tommy pulled Roy’s jacket together and buttoned it over the deep red flood at his waist.

“I can’t stand up. I can’t!” Roy’s face contorted and his legs buckled. Tommy helped him back to the seat. Roy gasped again and let out a long groan.

“Roy, I’ve got to go. The filth will be here any second. I’ll look you up. You haven’t seen me. You haven’t seen a thing, understand?”

Roy looked up helplessly. He trembled. His eyes began to slip.

“I’ll make it up to you. I’ll find you and you’ll be all right.”

In the distance a siren wailed above the general clatter of traffic, and blue light flashed through the spray.

Tommy glanced down again and saw that unconsciousness had relaxed Roy’s features. He pulled up his coat collar and began to run, splashing through the dancing puddles, across the oil stains that had created their own palettes, then he was turning his back on the rush of traffic and he was racing along the darker surface of the slip road toward a built-up area where cars were parked end to end on either side, where milk floats clinked and postmen wandered.

He found the narrow alley he was looking for and walked between the walls of brick and concrete. He sidestepped an overflowing gutter and fiddled with the rusty latch on a battered green gate. Beyond, across a tiny square of cracked concrete, he recognized a red back door and banged it until his fist hurt. He smacked on the mottled glass until lights were switched on and the sound of muffled voices came from within. Bolts were thrown back and the door opened and he looked into the astonished face of a heavy set man dressed in blue-striped pyjama bottoms and a white string vest who said, "Jesus!"

The man reached out quickly and helped Tommy into the kitchen. The door slammed shut. The wind increased in strength and drew more rain from the low cloud and sent it forcefully up the alley, pelting and rattling the green gate, lifting it over the fencing in a curved spray to collect and run down the glass of the back door, collecting the light from within as it zigzagged its way southward.

Chapter 7

The post-war three-bedroom terrace was built to a similar format across the length of the country. The back door led to the kitchen that in turn led to the hallway and the stairs to the bathroom and bedrooms. When Tommy awoke it was in the curtained back bedroom. His clothes were piled neatly on a single chair and his watch faced him from a small MFI bedside locker. It was ten o'clock. He could hear the hum of Simply Red on Radio One and the playful chattering of sparrows on the outside guttering. He swept back the duvet and examined a dark bruising that began on his ribs and swept down beneath the elastic of his shorts. He left open the bathroom door while he used the pan and sluiced his head in a basin of cold water. He borrowed one of three toothbrushes upended in a plastic beaker and cleaned his teeth then considered using the razor but decided against it. There were some things you didn't borrow. Not today in the age of AIDS and Aquarius. He walked back into the bedroom and sat on the bed while he fastened his watch. Shadow filled the doorway and he glanced up. A woman stood framed in the light from the landing, arms folded, shoulder leant against the doorframe, the questions on her face wanting some answers.

"You've been on the radio. Least, I'm guessing it was you. A shoot-out on the M1, some guy full of holes, coppers all over the shop."

"Don't know what you're on about, girl."

"You bleedin' well do!"

She was in her mid-twenties, darkly tanned, half-Middle-Eastern with large black eyes and shiny-cropped hair. There was a touch of rouge on her cheeks. Or was it anger?

"Where's Pete?"

“He’s gone to bleedin’ work, where do you think?”

It was anger, he decided.

“And the boy?”

“Round next door. I made out I wasn’t feeling well. And that wasn’t a lie, seeing you here!” She moved into the room and drew back a pair of thin blue curtains. “I’ll go and make a drink. I want you out of here by lunchtime.” He watched her walk back across the room and noticed the trim figure working beneath her pencil-line black skirt. Suddenly she stopped and turned and looked back from the landing through the open door.

“Don’t you get any ideas, Tommy Smith! You’re getting coffee and naff all else!”

Tommy raised his hands in mock surrender and grinned. He lay back on the bed and tried to recall what had happened. He remembered the strong arms of Peter Hough helping him to the couch and then a phone call, but that was all.

A few moments later she returned with a mug of sweet coffee. He sipped it and watched her move back to the window to gaze out at the wet tiled rooftops and the chimney-stacks throwing up white strands of smoke from the smokeless fuel.

Against the light her blouse became transparent and through it he could see the curve of her breast.

“Who did he phone last night?”

“Last night? It wasn’t bleedin’ last night. It was five o’clock this morning. He was going to call your brother but he couldn’t get through. I don’t know what the neighbours are going to think with you banging on the door at that time.”

“Sod the neighbours. Come and sit over here.”

“Piss off Tommy,” she said and continued to gaze from the window.

“That’s nice.”

She half turned toward him and her eyes narrowed fractionally. “You’re trouble, Tommy. You always were. You’re like a magnet and bother is drawn to you. You can handle it most of the time, but other people can’t and they get hurt. Now you might care or you might not care about other people but it makes no difference ‘cos they still get hurt whether you do or not. Pete wanted to stay and help and get involved like a few years ago but I don’t want you near him. That’s why he’s gone to work. And when he comes home tonight he won’t even ask what happened, ‘cos nothing happened. You were never here.” She hesitated and drew a deep breath. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Tommy? The past is gone. It never happened. You shouldn’t have come. I wish you hadn’t. Pete’s trying to make a go of it, and he’s trying hard for

the sake of the kid. He ain't got your brains and if he follows you he'll end up inside again. That's all I've got to say to you, Tommy Smith. Next time you get hurt and you walk past this house, I want you to keep walking. For you and your family it doesn't exist!"

He nodded and gulped at his coffee. His eyes had dulled at the rebuke. He leant across to the chair and fished in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. He lit one and settled back and watched a jet of smoke stream up to the artex ceiling. She noticed the sudden flicker of his eyes, the sudden steely dullness that came down like an inner lid as the sparkle went out, and she shrank back immediately. Her recoil could not have been more noticeable had she stepped on something evil and repulsive. The fear drained her face of colour and her hand half hid her features as she pinched her quivering lower lip. She knew that she'd overstepped the mark. One word from him and she'd be back on the meat rack at King's Cross. One word from him and her efforts over the past few years would count for nothing, her plans for the family totally irrelevant. She owed Tommy and his family and she knew that the debt could never be repaid. You gave them whatever they asked for; offer them anything less and you offended them. They were not the sort of people to take for granted or threaten or voice an opinion about and now, after all this time, she'd allowed her temper to get the better of her self-preservation. The thought and her fear showed on her face.

Tommy turned his head on the pillow and looked at her, still mildly embarrassed.

"I didn't mean all that, Tommy," she said sheepishly, turning toward him. She looked at the floor, refusing to meet his gaze, knowing the cruelty she would find there.

"Leave it out, girl. You meant it all right. Forget it."

She glanced up, surprised.

"You won't tell Pete what I said?"

He smiled. "Not a word."

She nodded briefly while the relief softened her features.

"Well, shall I get in with you?"

"No, you do what you want to do."

"I want to, Tommy, but if I got the choice then I won't."

He grinned. "Once upon a time you were a slag, you know that? Now you're a lady. If you and the kid ever need for anything, just let me know."

"Is Pete included?"

“Can’t be, can he? He left the firm. Once you leave, if you’re allowed to, then you lose all fringe benefits.”

“I left.”

“No you didn’t. You’re just on a temporary leave of absence. Call it extended maternity leave.”

She looked at him thoughtfully, considering the implications, and they didn’t worry her.

“You’re not like the others.”

“A lot of people say that. You can’t blame me for what other people think.”

“I don’t want the kid hurt, that’s all. I want everything for him.”

“Is he Pete’s?”

A moment’s hesitation destroyed the possibility of a lie. “He looks like your older brother but Pete thinks he’s the spitting image of his dad.”

“We might as well go along with that then.”

“I think so,” she said softly.

He finished his cigarette and reached for his clothes.

“It’s time I was on my way.”

“I hope you old man’s all right.”

“It’s got around then?”

“It’s been in the paper. An emergency operation, it said. They called him a property tycoon with links to the underworld.”

“Stone the crows! It sounds like we’ve been advertising.”

“Does it mean a lot of trouble?”

“We could do without it.” He shrugged and added, “A bit of bother, that’s all.”

She walked across to him and straightened his collar and looked into his bloodshot eyes. She said quietly, “If it had been you I wouldn’t have left.”

“If it had been me I wouldn’t have let you.”

She followed him from the room, across the landing and down the stairs.

“I want to make a quick call,” he said.

She pointed into the living room.

He found a small neatly furnished room: a leather three-piece, a wall unit housing a shelf of books, another of photographs of a young child, a drinks unit, a television and video, a stacked music centre, pale grey wall-to-wall and Dralon curtains over uPVC double glazing, the smell of lemon-scented polish and a gas fire. It was a hideaway and he felt like a trespasser. He punched six digits into the phone and listened to three rings before he heard a familiar voice. While he spoke he looked across at the girl and although his thoughts were on the call his eyes lingered on every curve.

“Dave? It’s me. I’m home. Be about thirty minutes. How is he?”

For a few seconds he listened and then he replaced the handset.

She asked, “Is he all right?”

He shrugged. “They’re seeing the consultant later.”

She nodded. At the door he brushed her painted lips. They were surprisingly cold. It was a platonic kiss that reminded him of a thousand broken promises.

“Bye, Denise,” he said, still tasting her, and moved into the yard. She’d closed the back door before he’d even stepped across the puddles to the gate.

The day was brighter. The rain had stopped and the cloud had become feathery and broken. He stepped into the alley and closed the gate behind him, conscious of the dripping surroundings, the overflow snout still trickling and the ground beneath washed clean and glistening. The air was chilled and fresh and tinged with the smell of wet grass and the fumes of the city. He was home. The thought added a spring to his youthful step.

To the left of the darkened alley entrance a navy-blue Lada stood idling on freshly painted, double yellow lines. It idled on the fast side and it rattled as Ladas do, phut-phutting gently from its nervous exhaust. Its square shape reminded passers-by of a fifties style. The driver they saw, with his collar pulled up, the roll-up suspended from his lips, his face a mask of concentration, was instantly forgettable, nondescript, and the passenger in the back seat was hardly noticeable either, perhaps because anonymity was his trademark and, as with the driver, a necessary part of his profession.

Chapter 8

Theca, the Star of the Veldt, glanced up expectantly as her elder brother walked in from the entrance hall. Her features were classically English, her pale skin emphasized by her dark hair. Even though she was tired and drawn, her loveliness was still evident.

“It was Tommy,” he said quietly and saw the relief in her brownflecked eyes.

Every time the telephone rang it was a heart-stopping moment. The door was purposefully closed on it, so that the conversation was private. When the door opened again the same troubled questions were written in the strained eyes.

“He’s back. He’ll be here in half-an-hour.”

At Theca’s side at the dining table his mother said, “Thank God for that, at least.” She lifted her china cup from its saucer and fought to control its shake. Her eyes were raw and beneath them the darkness spread out like deep bruises. “Where is he?”

“Over in Mill Hill. He’s taking a cab.”

“What’s he doing over there?” Worry made her voice quiver. She shook her head. “Did he sound upset?”

Dave said gently, “I said we’d explain everything when he got here.” He was a big man of thirty-nine, balding prematurely, fighting a weight problem, but losing. His eyes, brown and large, were dulled and sore through lack of sleep. As he sat down heavily at the table he glanced across at his sister as if to share some secret message. Theca saw it and looked at her mother. Sally was stunned like the rest of them, her face fraught and pale. In the last two days she seemed to have aged ten years. She was too wise not to appreciate what was going on – the knowing glances, the lowered voices and the door closing on the telephone calls – but she was too tired to argue.

She finished her tea and moved from the table.

“I’ll go and get ready. When Tommy comes in I’ll make some lunch and then we’ll go. What time is it now?”

“It’s ten to twelve. We’ve still got two hours!” Theca shrugged, irritated by her mother’s fussing.

Sally turned to her son. “David, I want to call in at the shops on the way. I need some things for your father.”

“Can’t you send someone? Where’s Lucia?”

“She’s gone home for the holidays.”

Dave shook his head at his own forgetfulness. Lucia always took her holidays to coincide with those of the family. Eventually he said, “I’ve got people sitting outside doing nothing.”

“No, that won’t do at all.”

“I’ll go and get the shopping now,” Theca said, jumping at the opportunity to get away for a while. “Write a list.” She turned to Dave. “When Tommy gets here you can tell him what’s happening.”

“Sounds OK,” Dave said, hiding his unease. He left the two women busily making a list and went back into the hall. He dialled a number and spoke quietly into the handset.

“Tommy’s due back. Look out for him. Theca’s going to do some shopping. She’ll use the Mini. Stay with her.” He hung up as Theca appeared and opened the cupboard for her jacket. As she reached up he noticed her willowy figure. She’d always been on the slim side but just lately the weight had fallen off her.

“I’ll call in and see Ted on the way back,” she said and then quietly added, “I think we should have someone in to help out, just for the time being, particularly since Lucia’s away for the next two weeks.” Lucia was the live-in housekeeper, a young woman from St Michelle in northern France. She’d been looking after the family for five years and during that time had become more than an employee. She was the granddaughter of one of her father’s old friends, a woman named Nathalie Mazeau he’d met during the war. Lucia had arrived in order to improve her English and she had stayed, simple as that, taken over the running of the house and become part of the family. Their parents also employed a daily cleaner and a gardener but Theca was suggesting something else, perhaps even more than a temporary replacement for Lucia.

“I don’t know, Sis. It keeps her occupied. I don’t think we should change things at the moment. In any case, once Lucia gets wind of what has happened she’ll probably catch the next flight back.”

Theca saw his point and shrugged. She opened the front door.

“There’ll be two guys behind you.”

“Why?” She turned sharply.

“Because they do what I tell them to do. Until we know what’s happening out there we’ve got to play it safe.”

“I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“That’s beside the point. You’re a Smith. Start acting like one. Until things are sorted we’ve got to watch ourselves.”

“I don’t like it, Dave. I don’t like to be followed. I don’t trust them and they make me nervous.”

“You won’t even know they’re there. Now go on, get the shopping.”

She slammed the door. Dave shook his head and smiled. In the kitchen Sally asked, "What was that about?"

"You know the Star, Ma. She's got a temper at the best of times but at the moment she's a bit emotional, like the rest of us. She flared up at the thought of a couple of minders."

Sally nodded, understanding more than Dave knew about her daughter's dilemma. The women in the family were not involved in the business and when it threatened their freedom, they felt hostility towards it.

"She thinks you ought to have someone in to help out, until Lucia gets back."

Sally tried a smile but it wasn't convincing. "No, that wouldn't do and I can manage perfectly well."

"I know, Mum." Dave reached out and put his arm around her shoulders. "Go and get ready. I'll put the kettle on. Tommy will want a drink when he gets in."

As he filled the kettle he watched his mother walk stiffly from the kitchen past a calendar hanging by the door. It showed the month of May 1986 and the date of Friday 23rd was circled in black ink, marked because his parents were supposed to be flying out to their villa in Portugal for a couple of weeks in the sun. They generally managed a couple of weeks in May as well as the whole of August when they took the grandchildren and Lucia with them. Dave sighed at the irony. The pressure of business, particularly the noises of hostility emanating from the north, had weighed heavily on his father and he'd needed some heavy persuading not to postpone the trip.

Dave heard the door open and saw Tommy sneaking through the lobby. His clothes looked as though he'd slept in them and a watermark on his blue collar had dried to a white ring. Stubble on his chin darkened his tanned features and his bloodshot eyes lent a sparkle to the steely blue. He had the same colouring and characteristics as his mother. Both Dave and the Star of the Veldt took after their father.

Tommy's grin was reflex, a sigh of relief at being home and seeing a face that he could trust.

"Where's Ma?" he whispered.

"Upstairs," Dave said quietly. "Christ, you look rough."

He moved to pour some tea. Tommy sat down.

"I could've done without the advertising. I had some bother getting back."

Dave nodded over the steaming teapot. He replaced the china lid.

"I guessed as much. I saw the news and put two and two together. I thought about sending you an escort but you'd already left the hotel."

“I couldn’t hang around,” Tommy said seriously. “They knew where I was staying. As soon as I heard it on the one o’clock I was out of there. I had to leave the motor. Mick had his soldiers on the street and I wasn’t waiting to see if they were taking prisoners. They were coming in the front door as I left through the back. I couldn’t ring you from the hotel!”

Hotel billing systems automatically logged outgoing calls and there was no way Tommy wanted his whereabouts recorded.

“You sure they were Mick’s people?”

“Who else knew I was up there?”

Dave pulled a face. His brother had a point but he was also inexperienced. Dave was wise enough to know that few people could be trusted. The family had a lot of enemies that smiled like the best of friends. A whisper in the right ear could prove more deadly than a frontal assault.

“What happened?”

“I thought we’d made it.” He sipped his tea gratefully then pulled a face and reached for the sugar bowl. “Just relaxing when they hit us coming off the A41. I thought the bleedin’ Chernobyl had gone off again. The geezer giving me a ride took one in the side. It looked bad.”

“How the hell did they find you?” He didn’t spell it out but a veiled criticism that Tommy had been followed from the hotel was left hanging.

Tommy shook his head. “Just a guess but there was a kozzer at the service station where I picked up the lift – on the M6. I think he recognized me.”

“Bastards! That’s as good as a direct line to Mick. He’s got the motorway coppers up there totally buttoned up. They give his shipments from Liverpool a fucking escort!”

“That’s what I thought. Anyway, I ended up at Hough’s gaff overnight.”

Dave frowned, “Pete Hough?”

Tommy nodded.

“He’s not one of us, Tommy.”

“I had no choice. Anyway, I got away with it.”

“Was Denise there?”

“Yes.” Tommy laughed in order to cover his thoughts but eye contact that went on a moment too long gave the game away. He added, “She kicked me out this morning. But I still got a right earache.”

Dave shrugged his suspicion aside and said, "It was still dangerous. You should have come home."

"At the time I could hardly stand up and the filth was all over the shop."

"What happened?"

"Shotguns. They hit us four or five times. Messed up the paint work good and proper."

"Christ! It sounds like you were lucky. But so far south! It's a bit fucking naughty."

"It doesn't make a lot of sense, though."

"Go on?"

"Think about it. Mick wouldn't have made a mistake. It's not his style at all. And with a set-up like that he couldn't have been certain."

"What then?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't add up." Tommy lit a cigarette and blew smoke out with the question, "How's Pop. Is he safe?"

Dave's grunt was almost contemptuous. "You know he was bad at the wedding?"

Tommy nodded, remembering it well. His father had looked ill and both he and his mother had left the reception early, immediately after the firework display.

"He went to The Tower on Monday still moaning about his gut. His foot was playing up too. He wouldn't see Noddy and spent Tuesday morning in bed with Mum fussing around him." Dave paused while his younger brother put out his barely touched cigarette. "Tuesday afternoon he started throwing up. Theca came round, took one look and called Noddy. From the smell of it she guessed it came from the lower gut. Noddy took a look and said hospital. Teddy was over at the Castle so Theca drove Pop to the hospital herself. Panic isn't the word. She rang Barry and he got hold of me. It was theatre that same night, no messing. The girls were in one hell of a state. It was questionable whether he was going to pull through the operation. They didn't think they'd see him again." Dave waved a dismissive hand. "Anyway, some bastard over there squealed to the press and the next thing we knew the BBC had set up camp. That's when your trouble started. By the time I phoned, you'd already legged it. We went up last night but he was still shaky. I don't know whether he recognized us. He's got tubes coming out of his arms and a catheter or something stuck in him but they've eased the blockage. That's all they'd tell us. We're seeing the consultant at two."

"How's Ma taking it?"

"Hard, as you'd expect. Theca stayed here last night."

“What about the hospital? Is he safe?”

“Don’t talk to me about that. It’s a bloody madhouse. They’ve got him in an open ward. He wouldn’t hear of going private. You know him and the NHS. He wouldn’t even let me get him a private room. I’ll have another go today but I know the answer before I start.”

“You’ve got people in there?”

“Christ yes. Mind you, it’s probably not necessary. Half the Yard is camped out over there.” Dave grinned. “Still, you should see our guys. They’re going to kill some poor sod with a trolley before long.”

For a few moments Tommy considered all that he’d heard then he glanced up and said, “They’re supposed to be flying out today. It’s a shame this didn’t wait until next month.”

“I know what you mean, but just think if it had happened next week with him in the middle of Portugal.”

They heard the sound of a light step and turned to see Sally. Tommy was on his feet immediately and went into the kitchen to hug her. She seemed small and fragile against him.

“Oh, Tommy,” she sighed and pressed the side of her face against his chest. She shook away her emotion and said, “Some of your clothes are upstairs. You’d better go and change. And shave. You can’t turn up at the hospital looking like that. You should have let us know where you were.”

Tommy released her.

“David has told you everything? I’ll make some sandwiches. You go and change now. We haven’t got long. Isn’t the Star back yet?”

Dave called in from the dining room, “She’s calling in to see Ted.”

“Oh yes,” Sally’s thoughts were elsewhere: in the hospital, in the past, in the fearsome future. She turned to the worktop and began on the sandwiches.

They were almost ready and Sally was just adding garnish when the door opened and Theca led Ted into the kitchen. She lifted a bulging Marks and Spencer bag on to the side.

“Hello love; hello Teddy.” Even as she spoke Sally barely glanced up. “Did you get everything?”

Theca nodded and began to unpack. Ted kissed Sally’s cheek and hugged her quickly, silently, before joining the brothers in the dining room.

“All right, Teddy,” Dave said. It was a greeting, not a question.

Ted nodded and turned to Tommy, “How did you make out?”

Tommy said quietly, “I’m in one piece, but lucky. Explain later.”

Ted glanced through the open door at the women busily unpacking the shopping. His curiosity would have to wait. He was shorter than the brothers and carried much less weight. He was forty, greying, and had about him a studious look accentuated by silver-rimmed spectacles positioned slightly low on his nose. He wore a dark-blue pinstripe with a strip of yellow handkerchief above his top pocket.

Sally carried in the sandwiches and fresh tea.

“Did the children get to school all right?” She asked.

“No problem,” Ted said. “Jean came in early to look after them.”

“Will they let us see Dad this afternoon?” Tommy asked.

Dave frowned for a moment and then smiled at his younger brother. He said, “They’ll let us do anything we like.”

Ted chuckled.

Sally’s glance was sharp. She’d heard it before, from her husband, but always in jest. He didn’t really believe it. Yet there was an intrinsic truth in what her eldest son had said. They did get their way and people fell over themselves to accommodate them. She knew enough about the business to know that it wasn’t out of love or kindness. It was more out of fear and respect. Perhaps the two were related. Now that her husband lay seriously ill some of that respect would disappear and in its place would grow hostility and revenge. Keeping her family safe until the crisis was over was not going to be easy and the responsibility rested on David’s shoulders. She was not sure whether he was ready for it. She looked at her eldest son and saw her husband and when he spoke she heard her husband.

“Are we ready then?” she heard and watched Dave lead the way. “Theca, you better take your motor. Ma and Tommy can come with me.”

Sally brushed a hair from her suit jacket and followed the others into the kitchen.

Although the house would be empty, they didn’t lock the doors or windows. They never did. There wasn’t a villain in London who would step foot on the road without an invitation, and for good reason. In Briar Court where the two-storey house surrounded by high brick walls – the Lodge – was situated, security was tighter than at Buckingham Palace.

As the two cars pulled out, the Star’s red Mini and Dave’s black Rover, another car with darkened windows pulled out in front of them. Before they’d travelled fifty yards yet another car with similar windows had pulled up behind them. From the upstairs windows in various houses

men watched the convoy move slowly to the corner and then sat back to continue their watch, feeling some relief that the family had left their patch without incident.

The great concrete and glass office buildings had emptied and the lunchtime crowds filled the pavements and burst into the roads. The cafés and restaurants and pubs were full. The convoy joined a stream of traffic and slid on to the North Circular. The four-storey red-bricked hospital loomed, the entrance canopy fanned out before them. Scruffy men carrying cameras and microphones leapt from their places and made for the slowing cars. As the family left to push their way through the press of reporters, two men appeared and slipped quietly into the driving seats of the cars and drove them to the park. Dave led the family to the glass doors of the lobby entrance, searching Fleet Street's faces for one that he recognized. Passers-by turned to watch the commotion, trying to put a name to the face. People inside looked stern and annoyed, upset by the intrusion, and wondered in turn who was getting the media attention. One or two officials shook their heads in dismay and muttered about the hospital being turned into a circus.

The wide starkly-lit entrance hall, smelling faintly of disinfectant, housed a shop, a café where the seats were uncomfortable and the fixed tables cluttered with empty cups and saucers, various receptions, clearly marked and signposted corridors radiating from both sides and, at the far end, a bank of lifts. The family went swiftly across the tiled floor, passing the busy receptionists. Their footsteps seemed loud and urgent. Tommy put his arm around Sally's shoulders and Theca flashed a secret message to Ted. They reached the lifts and stood aside as a couple of name-tagged specialists in white coats came out laughing. In the enclosure of the lift Tommy asked, "Was it like this last night?"

"Worse," Dave said flatly. "The TV people had a van outside but we had that moved. The BBC weren't keen on the medical programmes we had in mind. We promised them something starring their own cameramen."

The lift halted abruptly and the doors slid open. They moved out to the third floor reception and stood by an area of seats and a drink machine while Dave went across to the desk. Moments later he returned and told them, "He'll be with us in two minutes. Let's sit down. Dad's comfortable." They sat tensely, straight-backed, aware of every tiny movement. Tommy lit a cigarette. A group of passing nurses gave him disapproving glances.

"You shouldn't smoke in here," Sally admonished, thinking perhaps that was the reason for the dark looks.

"Look, there's an ashtray," he said in defence.

She saw it and nodded.

"You shouldn't smoke anyway."

They watched a tall, slim man, dressed in a dark blazer and flannels lean over the reception desk, glance their way after talking to the girl sitting there, and then approach. Under his rich tan his gaunt looks indicated something in the region of forty-five. He smiled briskly, put a folder under

his arm and rubbed his spotless hands together. There was honesty in his square features. He looked carefully at the five of them and chose Sally.

“Mrs Smith?” His voice was touched with a French accent.

He sat down opposite and shuffled some papers from his file. His knowledgeable, almost sad eyes met Sally’s and moved to Theca, and then addressed the others.

“It’s not very good, I’m afraid. It doesn’t look good. As you know we operated to remove a blockage but...” He shook his head. “It’s not very good at all.”

“Is it cancer?” Sally blurted out the question, fighting for control.

“There is a growth that is widespread and we’ve taken a section for examination. I’m unable to identify it and it will be a few days before we know whether it is malignant.”

“What are you saying?” Sally asked.

The others looked grim-faced and resigned.

He raised his hands and offered, “A few weeks, a month.”

Sally blurted, “A month!” She looked horrified. The thought grooved its way across her forehead.

“Maybe longer,” the Frenchman added quickly, gently.

Sally was numbed, unable to speak, unwilling to comprehend.

Theca asked: “If you don’t know what it is how can you tell it’s a month?” Her voice was slightly hostile.

“You’ve always got to remember,” the consultant went on, “that while I speak to you in medical terms there is someone up there who has the last say. And He might decide He doesn’t want him, maybe, for a year, maybe two...”

Dave asked, “Have you spoken to him?”

The consultant nodded. “Yes, we talked this morning.”

“How is he taking it?”

“He is a very strong man. We managed to ease the immediate blockage and obviously he’s a lot more comfortable. We won’t do much more until we get the results.”

“If he’d come in earlier would it have made a difference?”

The consultant shrugged. He'd heard that question so many times. At length he said, "Even a year ago would not have made a difference."

Tommy remained motionless, gazing at the floor.

Ted said, "When can we take him home?"

The consultant seemed taken by surprise and his guard slipped momentarily. "Oh. Oh, well..." He shook his head to give himself time. Eventually he said, "Not for ten days at least. We must wait for the results then we can talk of that."

"It's important for us to get him home," Ted insisted.

"I can understand that." The sympathy hushed his voice to a whisper. "Let's wait for the results."

Sally asked quietly: "Can I go in and see him? I've brought some things." The consultant smiled sadly, "Of course."

"I'll come with you," Theca said.

"No!" Sally said firmly. "I'll see him on my own." She stood and picked up her bag and walked, a lonely figure, toward the ward entrance.

The consultant got to his feet. "You must watch out for her," he said and collected his notes. "I'll see you again." He moved off toward the reception. Dave caught up with him and the others watched although they couldn't hear what was said.

"You know who you've got in there, Doc. What can we do to give him a better chance?"

The consultant hesitated before he said, "This is something that cannot be fixed." His voice, so gentle and sympathetic when speaking to Sally, was now edged with contempt. "There is not a thing in the world that you can buy, or a surgeon or a hospital that will give your father a moment in the world longer that he will get here. And that is not very long."

Dave's expression hardened. "Out of respect for my old man we're seeing you here; we've come to you. He's a great believer in the Health Service. Don't get carried away with the idea."

The consultant studied Dave out of narrowed eyes. Tight-lipped, he said, "It was mentioned to me that your family has, how was it put? A certain influence? Let me make one thing quite clear to you. Your family will receive the same response from me and from my staff as any other family in similar circumstances. Do I make myself clear? No more and no less."

"Did I ask you for any favours?"

"If you didn't ask, then you haven't been turned down. Is that not so?"

“That sounds like a good place to leave it.”

The consultant nodded briskly, turned on his heels and left Dave looking thoughtfully after him. Dave wasn't angry or even annoyed but he thought that one day, after the event, he might hurt the man, just a little, just to make a point.

From the starkly lit waiting-room where they sat and waited for Sally, where Tommy fed a coin into the drinks machine to obtain coffee for the Star of the Veldt, a corridor led from the lifts past the reception desk, past the ward sister's office on the left-hand side, past the sterilization room and the toilets, to an open-planned ward that housed two rows of neatly made beds. All but two beds were occupied and an attendant and a nurse were busily making ready for visiting hours. Two of the beds were screened and, from the others, patients read quietly or watched, curious that a woman had been let in early to see the patient in the left-hand bed at the far end of the ward. They saw her bending over the patient, saw their lips move as they spoke, saw her clutch his hand in hers, his face tug into a huge grin and then her tears sparkling in the fluorescent wash.

Chapter 9

Shortly after getting married, Dave had moved into a seven-bedroom detached house on the Ridgeway. Since he had inherited three children from his wife's first marriage and later added two of his own, he needed all the space he could get. Things would get easier now that Patricia's eldest daughter, Jessica, was married. The weekend just gone, the marriage and her flying off to honeymoon in North Africa, seemed an age ago.

The house stood back from the main road, guarded on all sides by a high brick wall. Tall sweet chestnuts and thick evergreen shrubs surrounded the front garden. A gravel drive reached its end around a knot of camellias. At the rear of the house was a modest indoor swimming pool with a sauna enclosure built into one end and a gym next to that.

Soon after leaving the hospital Dave's Rover crunched on the gravel. A couple of minders closed the wrought-iron gate behind him. He checked the time and knew exactly where to find his wife. Patricia was on a health kick; the necessary worry that mothers experience during the run-up to a daughter's wedding had left her out of sorts and, according to her, desperately in need of the old routine. Dave found her in the pool. She'd completed thirty lengths but her breath was barely raised. She saw him, gave a little wave and used the metal rungs to climb out. She reached for a towel.

“You really don't need all this. You look in good shape to me.”

“Ugh! Look at this.” She pinched an inch or so of flesh around her middle. She slipped a robe over her swimsuit. “What happened?”

Dave repeated what the consultant had said and watched her face fall. She reached for her spectacles. They slightly enlarged her eyes and seemed to increase the compassion in them.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry.”

“Theca is staying with Mum for a few nights. We’re going to see him tonight. Mum wanted to be alone with him this afternoon.”

“That’s understandable. God, she must be feeling wretched. You all must be. I’ll get across to see her.”

“I’m not stopping,” Dave said. “But I wanted to let you know.”

She nodded gratefully but in her eyes there remained a hint of disappointment.

Another car rolled over the gravel and moments later Jimmy Jones peered through the pool window, acknowledged Pat’s wave and Dave’s nod and walked nonchalantly to the open door. Jimmy Jones had been one of his father’s most trusted employees and two years previously had become Dave’s right-hand man. It was not uncommon to find him at the house. He was considered a part of the family. His dark visage and sharp looks were trusted and totally accepted by the children. He was a stocky, good-looking man of part Indian or Pakistan extraction. He had never been sure for his Welsh mother had never bothered to ask.

“How did it go, Boss?”

For a second time but without some of the detail, Dave recounted what the consultant had said. They said goodbye to Pat and made their way back to the cars.

“Find out about that consultant,” Dave said. “He sounded French, Levy or something. He’s got an attitude problem. Wait till it’s all over then sort him out.”

That was enough. Jimmy Jones knew exactly what was required. On occasion it was necessary to remind people who was in charge. Perhaps not this week, or this month, but at some time in the future the Frenchman would meet with a little misfortune. If he had children it might be that they disappeared for an hour or two. They would turn up totally unharmed and none the worse for the experience, but in the horror of those two hours a parent can learn a lot of respect.

Dave continued, “Better send someone to Tunisia to keep an eye on Jessica and John. And make sure someone keeps an eye on Theca’s kids as well. A discreet eye! She’ll go spare if she finds out.”

“What now, Boss?”

“The hotel first,” Dave said without changing his expression. “I’ll be about an hour. Keep an eye on the foyer for me. I’ve got to make the hospital about seven. I’ll see you in the club after that.”

Jimmy Jones followed Dave across London to Park Lane and took up his station in the hotel reception. If any unwelcome face showed up and that included any press photographer who wanted faces for the Sunday supplements, he had plenty of time to warn Dave.

For Dave Smith the last couple of years had been coated in lethargy. He'd gone through the motions, hiding his sense of increasing languor from all but his wife. His feeling of detachment was fed by a growing suspicion that the old days were finished. The period of enforced idleness, the security that had existed for over a decade, had dulled the essence of his motivation. He needed an enemy, someone to fight. But just lately things were stirring again and Dave recognized the old feeling; something deep within him was beginning to spark. The trouble was one thing, the threat from Scotland sharpened his senses and pushed anger back into his eyes, hooded them so that his look was vaguely contemptuous, but Sharon Valenti played a part in it too. After all this time she remained a challenge. When her eyes flickered his way they seemed to question his masculinity – appreciating, certainly, but querying also. In a peculiar sense he felt that he had to prove something. That it was reckless made it all the more exciting. The feeling was extraordinary and mixed now with the danger, the threat to the family, it was inseparable. He was suddenly alive, heady with old sensations, and his instincts were being recharged by the moment.

Before Dave had properly closed the door on the seventh floor room – no penthouse suite this time; no suite for the wicked – Sharon Valenti had flown into his arms. Her negligee parted on the way and flashed him a nipple and a quick peep at genuine blond curls.

“Oh my darling! I thought you weren't coming. You're so late!” The words, fired in her staccato New England delivery, came breathlessly, between kisses. Her accent remained untainted by the years she'd spent in Runnymede.

She didn't stop to hear his excuse or to find out about his father. Those things would keep. She was all that he could have wished for. Being unable to bear children had kept her vagina duck-arse tight and she held him inside her and rippled against him, and he was drawn out, stretched, and the sensation was almost unbearable.

And yet there was something mildly detached and adrift about it all, a sensation of familiarity, that he felt at once comfortable and yet faintly disappointed. As he lay against her he experienced a sense of panic, an unreasonable fear that gripped his thoughts, mocking him. In that moment of introspection he felt that his time was running out, that something was creeping up on him and that sooner or later he would have to turn and face it. But there was no holding back. His release was urgent, vital, and when, through clenched lips she murmured, “Oh God! Oh my God!” a little smile played with his expression. It was not out of satisfaction, or even wantonness, simply the exquisite combination of power and self-destruction.

The guilt that Dave felt – that he should be indulging while his father lay close to death – lent an edge to his violence, and he hurt her.

While they made up afterwards she said, “Tony's got something going down. He's been making quite a few trips lately.”

“Oh,” he said.

“A couple back home. Thank God he didn’t take me. It would have stopped me seeing you.” She squeezed his hand against her breast.

“He’s back now?”

“Oh yes, unfortunately. But he’s buzzing. He’s up to something.”

“Like what?”

“If I get anything you’ll be the first to know.”

“Any visitors?”

“Just the usual crowd, no one I don’t recognize.”

“Heard anything about South America maybe?”

“No.”

“What about the word ‘distribution’? Heard that in passing?” She shook her head.

“What then?”

“He sings. He gets up earlier.”

“Fuck me. That does sound serious.”

She punched his arm and said, “Don’t make fun of me.”

“Sweetheart, would I do that?”

“On the other hand, I love it when you talk dirty.”

She moved her behind gently against him and snuggled in closer. He kissed the back of her neck. There were striking similarities between Sharon and his wife that had not gone unnoticed. He often toyed with the notion that the likeness gave him a certain security.

She sighed, “Christ, I’m exhausted. I could sleep.”

He smiled grimly.

“Every time with you it’s the same. I feel stretched to a pulp. It hurts, but in a nice kind of way. It shouldn’t, but it does. Every time is like the first time over again.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean I love you, you know that, but it’s something else too. I need to feel some pain. I like it. Not in any weird sense, but in the sort of submission, the laying waste, the feeling like a tom, almost, whose trick has just been a part of the rent, it’s an act of vengeance, pure and simple.”

“Vengeance?”

“Yes. Can you understand that?”

“I think so.”

“I hate him more than anything in the world. But I’m not stupid. I know I’m tied to him for life. There’s no way he’d let me go. He’d kill me before he’d do that. So taking in his sworn enemy is a small consolation. Got it?”

“That sounds like serious shit. How long have you felt this way?”

“I’m not using you, Dave. This is just an extra, the icing on the cake. I’ve loved you forever. You must have known that.”

“It can’t do any good to hate someone so much, not all the time. Anyway, if he doesn’t know about it, you aren’t doing him any harm.”

“I know that. But the feeling is for me, not him. Let me tell you something.” She lowered her voice. “I shouldn’t, but what the hell. After leaving you I don’t bathe or take a shower. I’ll go back and tell him that I’m kind of horny. He used to be a regular little rabbit. I’m talking three or four times a day. Not that he was any good, but he’s lost it altogether now. I know he’s seen doctors, the lot, and they put it down to narcotics. He was in and out of hospital dozens of times. I think the episode with you started it all. He got rid of all the mirrors in the house. We’re talking serious psycho shit here, a regular Norman Bates. But that was ten years ago.”

Dave gulped.

“Anyway, his addiction was one of the reasons they sent him over here. If he couldn’t sort himself out, then he couldn’t go home. The old man O’Connell took him in hand, got him off the junk and gave him back some kind of self-respect. But it was too late for his dick.”

“What’s it got to do with you not taking a shower?”

“Whoah! Don’t rush me. I’m coming to that. Even though he can’t get it up himself he still feels he has to look after me. He doesn’t, of course. He hasn’t got a clue. But I let him think he does the trick. He uses his fingers and his tongue. While I’m still tingling from your touch the old fool thinks he sucking out my own release. He doesn’t realize he’s getting his mouth full of you! His nose – what’s left of it – has been shot to hell by the coke; he can’t smell the difference!”

Dave smiled.

“You don’t mind?” she asked. Her back was still to him.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m pleased he’s not fucking you. It’s selfish, I know, but I never said I was perfect.” He reached to the side table for his Rolex and said, “It’s time I made a move.”

As he headed for the door he said, “Sweetheart, I’ll have to bell you, and let you know when and where. I need to stay close to home for a while; at least until I know what’s happening to the old man.”

Before he closed the door she nodded her understanding and blew him a kiss over the palm of her hand.

Dave found Jimmy Jones near the lobby telephone in a position that gave him a good view of the entrance. No mention was made of Dave’s diversion or the fact that he’d kept Jimmy waiting. It was accepted, a part of the job; it was questionable whether Jimmy Jones had even thought about it.

As they walked through the lobby Dave glanced through the glass wall partition into the bar and his step faltered. The years were peeled away and for a moment he was flat on his back and looking up into the lifeless eyes of a blond man.

He caught Jimmy’s arm.

“Clock the fair-haired geezer chatting up the barmaid. Have you seen him before?”

Jimmy Jones peered through the glass. The tall middle-aged man was perched on a bar stool, his elbows resting on the bar surface as he leant forward to talk to a woman behind the bar.

“Yeah, I’ve seen him around,” Jimmy said. “He came in about twenty minutes ago. Do you know him?”

“We met before; a long time ago. He had more hair in those days.”

Jimmy muttered, “Didn’t we all.”

They reached the entrance when Dave paused. “Look, I don’t believe in coincidence. Get a make on that guy, will you? How long has he been in town? Where’s he staying? What his name is for fuck’s sake.”

“OK Boss.”

“Make sure Sharon gets out of here OK. Make sure he doesn’t follow her. If he does, get a couple of guys together and get in his way. It shouldn’t be difficult. One of his legs is shorter than the other.”

Jimmy nodded. If he was surprised by the request it didn't show.

"I'll catch you at The Tower later," Dave said and left him to it.

Dave cut across Hyde Park Corner and Belgrave Square and made a left into Sloane Street. A few minutes later he pulled up on the Embankment opposite Battersea Park. The East End seemed a long way off, much farther than two pages on the A-Z. The city was changing by the day – and he didn't like it one bit. Great chunks of it had been turned into ghettos. London had always had its foreign quarters but this was different. They had been allowed to take over. One day he would take them on. He sighed and took a steadying breath, drawing in the smell of the river. Father Thames never changed as it twisted through the decaying capital, and even when the grim sky lent its depression to the water it remained constant and somehow comforting. There was something belittling about the river and its glorious history that drew him back time and again. The ebb and flow, its heartbeat, contained his ancestral blood; it whispered to him and turned his thoughts to the past. His grandfather had died in the thick water and more than that, for the same water had washed across his father and flowed into his father's heart.

Chapter 10

1926

Memory dulls both the good times and the bad and yet enhances the thing so that buildings become taller and ditches deeper, and the in-between times cease to exist. It takes something special – a sound, a smell, a certain look – to stir a recollection. The concrete and brick and smoke and grime of the city were real enough. And so were the slums that soured the hearts of the people who lived in them.

Youngsters squatted precariously on a slate roof, held there by the worn leather of their boots. They played between slats of rusted tin and corrugated iron used to cover places of missing lead, and they hung to chimneys and flues and pipes, pointing at the great plumes of steam and the belching black smoke and the occasional tongue of flame. They squatted on their haunches and laughed and joked and smoked the dog-ends that they'd found, and they kept glancing at their lookout stationed on a higher ledge as he watched for adults and in particular the adult who used his truncheon on truants. This was their den, hidden away, and the noises and smells of the narrow soot-coated streets and dark, dangerous alleys, the canals and markets, the maze of warehouses and small businesses, the tiny yards full of black mud piles and pools of stagnant water and small piles of glistening slack, filled their playground.

"It must be time to be getting back," one of the youngsters said. His name was Tom Smith. "My old man is off down south tonight and I'd like to get to go with him."

“I like your old man,” another said. His name was Simon Carter. He was heavier than Tom, but slower. He picked at tiny lumps of moss and lichen that grew on the slate and absently flicked bits of it over the edge. “He’s all right. Where’s he going then?”

“Don’t know, really. South, somewhere, by the sea.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing the sea. That would be something. One day we could take off and see it. Us lot.”

“Takes a long time to get there, even in a van. If you couldn’t get a lift it would take maybe a week.”

“You ain’t been so how do you know?”

“Southend is sixty miles. If you did ten miles a day, walking, that would be six days.”

“We could do more than ten miles a day.”

“Maybe we could, but it’s a long walk and what would we eat?”

“Take some fruit. We could nick some fruit. What does he do in Southend, then?”

“He ain’t going there. He’s going south. He’s going to the ports. Does every year. He said one year he’d take me.”

“When?”

“When I was nine.”

“You’re nine now.”

“Maybe he meant ten.”

“He’ll never take you. They all say things they never do.”

“He will. If he said it, he will. Trouble is me ma. She might not want us off school!”

They broke into laughter.

A mangy black cat skirted their roof, sprang silently on to their level and approached. The boys watched its circumspection. They saw the bald patches and the fur hanging in clumps and the swollen ticks hanging from its head. The black tail flicked. Its purr turned into a shriek as the corner of a slate glanced off its side and it flashed away over the roof.

“What did you do that for?”

“They are full of fleas. Did you see him jump?”

“There was no need for that.”

“Bleedin’ hell, Tommy, what’s the matter with you all of a sudden? It was only a soddin’ tom. Is that it, because it’s got your name?”

Tom turned to face the other boy. Simon grew at once concerned and even in his crouched position he eased himself away.

“I’m going home now,” Tom said and moved down the sloping roof.

“See you later, after dinner,” Simon shouted.

Tom eased himself over the lip of the roof, lowered his feet to a brick wall then jumped to the ground. He dusted grime from the seat of his short trousers and walked swiftly from the alley into the bustle and noise and smell of the High Street.

Lorries and vans rattled by on their balloon tyres, carts went with the clatter of hooves, bicycles hissed past, pedestrians pushed and dodged. Ahead of him the market spread out in a maze of flapping stalls. He weaved his way through the pitches piled high with clothes and junk, silver-scaled fish and freshly cut flowers, oranges in their crumpled tissues, apples polished until they shone, glinting pots and pans, and everywhere merchants shouted louder for attention. He paused by his favourite stall where the sinister ranks of second-hand furniture with its dusty smell of old wood and upholstery filled him with a reverence he could not understand; its pull remained a mystery. He flicked at a couple of boxes of tattered books marked down to a penny then noticed the Jew watching him. The owner in his navy-blue greatcoat nodded and grinned knowingly, toothlessly, and gave him a wave. Tom moved on without acknowledgement for it wasn’t wise to be recognized, even less wise to be seen talking to a Yiddish bookseller. Everyone hated the Jewboys, except the Jewish girls. They were the bogeymen and always had been. Most of them lived in the slums of Whitechapel where they hid from the Watney Street gangs that controlled that part of town.

At the corner he stopped to watch tinkers go by; the wanderers, trundling past with their broken prams full of their belongings, selling their pot-scrubbers and pegs and sprigs of lavender as they went. The horse passed him and he saw the dark superior eyes of two women who sat on the cart, and they flashed him worldly smiles. A couple of mangy dogs kept close to the wheels. He watched the little parade until it was out of sight then he crossed the road and began to climb a long hill that would take him home. A coal merchant’s dray drawn by a weary Clydesdale rumbled slowly toward him. It came to a standstill while a blackened coalman emptied sacks through a coal hole in the pavement. The old man saw him and dusted down his sackcloth and gave him a wide grin.

“All right, Tommy boy?”

“All right, Jack. Got to get on, can’t stop. Going down south.”

“That’s a good place to go.”

Tom hurried on and turned up the alley that led to his back gate. A tiny high-walled yard led to the back door. Limp washing barely stirred on the line. A tarpaulin covered a pile of timber. A tin bath rested against the steamed kitchen window. Three small outhouses contained coal, the WC and a mangle and washboards.

In the matriarchal tradition his mother carried the family and like most women in the district she had grown old before middle-aged. She said, “Your teacher was here earlier.”

Her words caught him as he closed the back door and stopped him in his tracks. She stood at the stove stirring a dark stew. Tom worked furiously for an excuse but it was hopeless. Even though his mother’s back was to him he could imagine her stern expression.

“What’s your dad going to say? I know what he’ll say and you won’t like it one bit.” She turned and looked across at him and stabbed the air with a wooden spoon. “Why didn’t you go to school?”

He shrugged. “It’s boring, Mum, and Mr Simpson is always having a go. You don’t learn nothing.”

“A lot of things in life is boring, Tommy, but you still got to do them.”

“It’s all history and dates, and countries I’ve never heard of and rivers I’ll never see.”

“You’re right. You will never see them unless you get some learning. And history is important. It tells you who you are.”

“Yeah, like Henry the Eighth. Who cares?”

“I care.”

“He picks on me and Simon, says we’re lousy, says Sim’s got scabies.”

“Most of your mates have got scabies and if they’re going to do a runner every time the medical officer visits they’ll never get shot of it.”

“How would you like to be painted purple so everyone knows?”

She folded her arms. “It catches and so does lice. You pick it up from your mates and you’ll bring it home.”

“It’s not their fault.”

“I didn’t say it was, did I? And I don’t think you should change your mates either, but you could tell them the wisdom of seeing the medical officer. And so what if other people know? Half the school is down with it.”

“That’s all right for you to say.”

She smiled gently. Already stooped in her mid-thirties, Rose’s eyes were clear and brown. She said, “You’re just like your old man.”

“I don’t look like him much. People say I look like you.”

She put down the spoon, wiped her hands on her apron and began to peel potatoes. The grey in her thick hair caught the light from the window.

“What did you tell Mr Simpson?”

“I told him your dad needed your help on the van and that you’d be back next week.”

“I thought Dad was going down south?”

“So he is,” she said quietly.

Tom’s eyes widened. “I’m going?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“You’re a lady, you know that?”

She glanced up and for an instant he saw joy in her eyes.

“And you’re a gentleman,” she said. “Now go and find your dad and tell him dinner’s on the table.”

He was gone. The back door slammed behind him. Rose watched him race across the yard to the gate, flicking at the washing as he went. He was tanned, like his father, with a touch of Gypsy in his looks and yet she knew of no traveller in either family. He was lithe and muscular and for a lad of his age, when gawkiness was the thing, he was solid and well built. Rose watched the gate swing slowly shut then dropped a potato into the stew.

The Eagle Public House was a red brick building on the corner of two cobblestone roads. A stone statue of a golden eagle, its wings spread ready for flight, perched above the heavy front doors. Inside, the dark green walls kept the bar dim even when light poured in through the toughened windows. It was smoky and cluttered and run by Peter Woodhead whose fierce visage beneath a severely cropped head kept even the most dubious members of his clientele in order. His imposing frame capped by a familiar bowler hat helped, as did his reputation that no one would take lightly. The Eagle was a landmark, its upper floors towering over the terraced businesses

and rows of houses surrounding it. It was also a well-known meeting place for those who lived on their wits. The burglars sneaked in from Hackney, the conmen and fixers from Stepney, the thieves and pickpockets from King's Cross, and the more dangerous villains from Whitechapel and the Green. They came to drink and idle and set up their deals, they came to pay their dues or receive them, and they talked in low voices and sold information. They were seldom interrupted. Good citizens knew of the place and stayed away and the police knew of the place and stayed away for most of the time. And if the police were forced to look in by their superiors, then the word was the thing and when they looked they found it empty.

Tommy Smith's place at the bar was as established as his place at his own kitchen table. From that place, with his foot on the bronze-coloured rest, with one elbow planted firmly on the bar surface to guard his pint of mild, he could observe the saloon with its tables and chairs beneath wall prints of boxing promotions and photographs of old, never forgotten fighters. Fighting was a business and Peter Woodhead had financial ties with the gym adjoining his public house. He owned it. His boys, the best fighters in town, were another reason the Eagle remained trouble free when all about them violence tumbled from the bar rooms into the streets. The talk was about boxing and dogs and the nine-day general strike and how it had stopped the trams and brought docklands to a standstill, and sometimes the proposals for the new Tilbury Docks and the way it would turn docklands, general strike aside, into a ghost town. Just lately the Zeppelin and Vesuvius had also been mentioned. Tommy Smith was certainly interested in dogs and boxing and the strike and perhaps even the Tilbury Docks, in that order, but he couldn't have cared less about the Zeppelin and he'd never heard of Vesuvius. Like most men in the bar and, come to that, most men in the whole of the East End, he blamed Stanley Baldwin for everything.

"Be back on Sunday," he said, his voice hissing over broken front teeth. He rolled a cigarette and lit it.

"In time for church," Peter Woodhouse muttered. "Hello, here's your nipper."

Tommy turned to see his boy pushing by a group of men. One of them grabbed at the youngster and hoisted him shoulder high. "What have we got here?" he shouted. "You're training him right, Tommy. A good little middleweight, I should say." Others in the bar chuckled. There was a good-humoured affinity and the boy was perfectly safe.

Tommy grinned at his son hanging in the air and shouted, "Go on, sock him in the mouth, my son!"

The man holding the boy aloft stuck out his jutting jaw for him to hit. The boy's fist, with surprising speed, landed squarely on the man's nose.

"Gawd! Stone the crows!"

A hoot of laughter erupted as the boy was dropped.

"Gawd, he's got a bleedin' sting."

The boy looked back and grinned, swelling in self-esteem. He reached his father's side.

"All right, Tom boy?"

"Yeah."

Peter Woodhouse held a glass to the light and while inspecting it said, "You ought to send him around to the gym."

"Plenty of time for that," Tommy said. "What you after, boy? You're a bit too light for a pint."

"Mum says dinner's ready."

"We better be off then. Wouldn't want to upset her, would we? And I've got to get to the ports tonight."

"She said I'm coming."

Tommy frowned. "Did she? I wonder what gave her that idea."

"Come on, Dad. I can help."

"Could you indeed?" Tommy finished his beer and wiped froth from his mouth. "Let's shake a leg then. See you on Sunday, Peter."

"Yes, see you Tommy. And you little Tom." Peter Woodhouse paused then raised his pale blue eyes from the boy. His expression hardened. "Mind what I was telling you."

Tommy nodded and said, "I will. Thanks for the tip."

As they made their way from the bar and started up the hill he held the boy's shoulder.

The youngster looked up and asked, "What was he saying?"

"It's nothing for you to worry about."

"Go on, tell me, Dad."

"Some bleeder is playing up rough. Says we ain't paying our rent proper. Stopping people at the market and hurting them."

"We pay our rent."

"It's not for the house, boy. We don't pay rent on the house. It's all ours, handed down. It used to be your granddaddy's house and before that your great granddaddy's. And one day it will be yours." He paused to relight the stub of his roll-up before continuing. "This is business. They

want a cut of the business and some of us won't give it to them. Lousy bleeders want something for nothing."

"Who is it?"

"Some nasty geezers from the Cross. Don't you take no mind to it, and don't you mention it to your ma."

"I won't, but what's the name? What's the gang?"

His father glanced down, surprised. "The KC Boys," he said. "What do you know?"

"Nothing. Simon was telling us his old man has the same bother."

"Who? Simon Carter? His old man works the docks, don't he?"

"When he can get it. He's been put off lately, and his back's been playing up. But they're on strike at the moment, or something, so it makes no difference."

"Strike a light! If they're on the make from hardship cases like that then it's worse than I thought. His mother's dead ain't she?"

"Yeah, she died when he was a kid, six or something."

His father grunted and said grimly, "Things won't get any easier for them, not now, not in the short term."

"Blood poisoning, or something. He told me. She caught it after his sister was born. Something was left behind, I think. It didn't make much sense. They cut her arms off and then her legs off and then she died. He can't remember too much about it. But it was a bit frightening."

His father nodded thoughtfully, his expression distant. He said, "Some people don't have much luck." He shook away the thought. "You tell me if you get any more whispers, boy. Sounds like you're hearing more than me. And remember, not a word to your ma."

"I know."

He grabbed his father's hand and they strolled slowly up the hill. Tommy's look suddenly engaged and he was back to his old self. He looked down at his son and grinned. "That was one hellofa shot, boy. You done well there."

Meals in the Smith's house were taken at the kitchen table. In the district the kitchen was regarded as the centre of the house and the sitting room was rarely used.

"I'll need some money off you," Rose said. "We're nearly out of everything."

“I’ve got some that will keep you going till I get back. I need a good trip. Funds are getting low. That bleedin’ clutch is costing a fortune.”

“Give my love to Elizabeth.”

“You should come with us.”

“Oh yes? And who would look after all of this? Just look at what happened to Molly when their place was empty for a fortnight, all the windows broken and everything gone. Even the tiles on the roof went.”

“We’ll only be gone a couple of days. It ain’t a week, is it? We’d be back before you know it, before the word got around.”

“It’s not worth the chance. In any case, going all that way, being bumped this way and that, just for a couple of days. A horse and cart don’t shake you around so much.”

Tommy sighed. “It’s the suspension. The springs ain’t what they were. I’ll fix them sometime and then we’ll all go out, maybe, to Epping Forest or Southend for the day.”

“I’d like that. I’d like to go back to Southend.” She looked at the youngster. “That’s where we spent our honeymoon. Mixed with the nobs in a proper hotel, we did.”

“Bed and Breakfast,” Tommy put in.

“Hotel,” she insisted. “They just didn’t serve dinner, that’s all, dinner and tea. You had to come back after tea so’s they had time to clean the room. Anyway, nobs go out to dinner.” She chuckled. “You know that.” She paused then said, “I’ve put some apples in the bag, and some sandwiches.” She turned to her son. “If you’ve finished you can go and get your other shirt on, and change your socks. Your other pair is on the bed. Don’t want you stinking Elizabeth’s house out, do we?”

Unable to speak with his mouth full, Tom rushed from the room.

“He’s excited,” Rose said. She filled two cups with tea and pushed one across to Tommy. “Don’t let him come to any bother.”

“He’ll be all right,” Tommy assured her. “He’s older than you think.”

“He ain’t growed up enough yet.”

“He’s a good lad, Rose. He’s turning out fine.”

“Make sure he keeps warm at night. It’s always cold by the sea.”

Tommy reached across and stroked his wife’s pale cheek.

“I’ll bring you something back,” he said.

Rose nodded and her lips smiled, but deep in her brown eyes was a look of sadness.

Under a darkening sky the white Morris van picked up the colour of gold as it weaved its way through the crumbling terraces of the city back streets, pinking and lurching in low gears. It crawled on through the treelined outskirts, past the buildings with their scrubbed porches and bay windows sucking light from the silent street lamps. As the dusk crept over the city and the spiralling starlings wheeled toward the flying buttresses of the Royal Courts, a low mist lifted from the river and spread through the streets. They drove into that time when the colours dissolved into powdery opaqueness and the landscape lost all form, when the mist overtook them and snaked its way along the estuaries and spread across the hedgerows and glistening fields, when tentacles of red smeared the western sky and blackness crept from the east. In the cabin Tom snuggled closer to his father’s sinewy arm and rested his head against the vaguely sinister tattoo of snake and dagger. He caught the faint whiff of perspiration and tobacco, a good clean comforting smell, and he snuggled closer still.

“You all right, my son?”

“Yeah.”

“Sleepy huh?”

“A bit.”

“It’s the fumes from the engine, see, and the lights flashing by. Puts you to sleep.”

“How long will it take?”

“Three, four hours. You get some kip if you like.”

“Maybe later.”

“Excited eh? Surprised your ma let you come after finding out about

skipping school. Mind you, I couldn’t get on with it. Never did. Sooner be out. Still, you been doing your reading and that’s the main thing. Know what I mean? What you reading now?”

“Don’t know, really, Two Cities, or something. Only done the first page. Had to give it up.”

“How come? Your ma told me you was a good little bleeder – oops, I mean reader!”

Tom shrugged. “It said it was the best time and the worst time both together. That’s stupid.”

“It sounds stupid. Who wrote that?”

“A geezer.”

“Well I know that much, don’t I? What geezer?”

“Arthur Dickens.”

“Never heard of him. I like the cowboys. I was a sucker for the westerns. I used to drive my old man hopping mad reading them all the while. Said I’d go blind.”

“So what does it mean then? The best and worst at the same time?”

“It’s a long time since I done any learning but let me explain it this way. It ain’t easy being a father, is it? Never was. When a kid is born it needs you all the time, never lets you get near the missus or get a decent night’s kip; and when it gets a bit older it wrecks your home, puts mud on the carpet, breaks everything in sight, and all you want to do is wring its bleedin’ neck; and when it gets older still, it starts to answer you back and, blow me down, it starts to believe in anyone else rather than you. So all the time you got a situation, sometimes you’re mad as hell and angry and hateful, all those things. But at the same time, no matter what the kid does, even when you’re telling him off or thumping hell out of him, you love him all the time. You can’t help it. It’s inside you. He means more to you than anything else. So maybe you could say that you love him and hate him at the same time. See? Now, when that geezer wrote that it was the best time and the worst time both together, maybe he was getting at something like that. Maybe it was his way of saying you could have two feelings at the same time.”

“I thought he was saying that for the rich people it was a good time and for the poor people it was a bad time.”

“Naw, my son. That’s always the case. Always has been. Always will be. He wouldn’t have to write that down, would he? Naw, the geezer was saying something but meaning something else. These clever bleeders are like that. That’s why they use big words; it’s to stop a fellow understanding what’s going on, see? Anyway, you read too much. It ain’t a good thing. It gives you headaches and bloodshot eyes. You’ll end up with glasses. If you read the talking stuff and skip all the rest you still get the story and it don’t take so long, see? A good little trick, that is.”

Headlights came like great flashes, blinding them, deepening the night.

“Back in the old days, before your old ma pulled you out of the hat, even when we were courting, we used to come down here, along this stretch of road. Whole families would come, the kids, parents, grandparents, even the bleedin’ great grandparents. Used to load up their carts and climb into trucks and come down here to pick the hops. Stay sometimes for a fortnight or more. The men who held other jobs, like my old man, your granddaddy who worked the markets, used to come down here for the weekends. On a good summer the fields of hops used to spread right the way to Dover. Gawd, the summers were hot in them days, hardly saw a drop of rain. Kids would be running around bare foot and bare shouldered. They’d be scrumpin’ the apples from the orchards over the road while the rest of us used to be picking from morning till night. I can still smell them now. A good smell; what life’s all about. Your old ma used to be a sprightly little

thing in those days, leaping up them wigwams to reach the top, pretty little thing full of smiles and laughter. Gawd knows what went wrong.”

“What do they use them for?”

“Brewing the beer.”

“What else?”

“Ain’t that enough? Gawd, boy, I can’t think of anything more important than that. Who needs anything else?”

“What do they look like?”

“Hops? Like fluffy sprouts, fluffy green sprouts. Rows and rows of them climbing up the wigwams and what’s more, all the plants are female. That’s something for you to know, ain’t it? They only grow one male plant at the start of each row.”

“How can they tell the difference?”

“Gawd, boy, if you don’t ask the most diabolical questions. I don’t know. Don’t think anyone knows. Maybe they got a tadger. Maybe the seeds come in a different packet, probably. But the bees know, and that’s the thing, and they do the trick, see? Go and visit an old male plant first, that’s why they’re put first in the row, then they go and stick their bleedin’ stings in all the females and what do you know? That’s it. Nature.”

“What would happen then, if they didn’t plant any of the male plants?”

“Well, for a start you wouldn’t have any honey, would you? And if you didn’t have the honey you wouldn’t have any bees and without them to do the business you wouldn’t have any flowers would you? Stands to reason, see? Then you wouldn’t have any beer. That’s a thought.”

The thought produced a frown and sent him into a worrying silence.

“I never knew that honey came only from the male flowers,” Tom said.

His father didn’t answer.