

GRAHAM
MASTERTON

WHAT HIDES
IN THE
CELLAR



'God, he's good' STEPHEN KING

WHAT HIDES IN THE CELLAR

ALSO BY GRAHAM MASTERTON

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GRAHAM MASTERTON

**WHAT HIDES IN THE
CELLAR**



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*For my friend Piotr Pocztarek, for running my
Polish website grahammasterton.pl so brilliantly.*

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An Invitation from the Publisher

1

Kenneth pushed open the front door with his shoulder and called out, ‘Gemma! I managed to find some of that baharat spice you were after! You know that Greek shop on Ada Street? They had some in there!’

‘You found *what?*’ came a hoarse voice from the end of the hallway.

Kenneth frowned into the darkness. He could just make out a squat figure standing between the staircase and the living-room door.

‘Who the hell are *you?*’ he demanded. He set down his two bulky shopping bags, and then switched on the overhead light.

He was confronted by a short, wide-shouldered man in a camel-coloured Crombie overcoat with its brown velvet collar turned up. The man was wearing a brown trilby hat so that his face was hidden beneath the shadow of the brim, although Kenneth could see his eyes glistening like an animal hiding in a cave.

‘Excuse me!’ he snapped, although his voice sounded higher than he had intended. ‘Who the hell are you and what the *hell* do you think you’re doing here?’

‘You *what?*’ the man retorted. ‘I could ask you the same bleeding question. Here I am just about to take meself off down the pub and you come barging in here like you own the gaff, shouting out some load of old bollocks. I hope it’s not my missus you think you’re going to be meeting up with, because you’re in dead trouble if it is.’

Kenneth approached him, breathing hard. The brim of the man’s hat reached up only to Kenneth’s chest, but he had a

threatening spring-loaded tension about him. Now that he was closer, Kenneth could see that he had a pink cord-like scar that ran all the way from his right cheekbone to the side of his mouth. His coat reeked of cigarette smoke.

‘I don’t know what on earth you’re talking about,’ Kenneth told him. ‘All I can say is that you had better make yourself scarce, right now, because if you don’t I’m going to call the police.’

He took his phone out of his pocket and held it up.

The man tilted his head left and right, looking up and down the hallway.

‘Oh, yes? Call the filth, will you? And how are you going to do that?’

Kenneth said, ‘Dial nine-nine-nine, of course.’

‘Oh, yes? How? There ain’t no phone here that I can see.’

‘What do you think this is?’ said Kenneth, holding his phone right up in front of the man’s face.

‘How the fuck should I know? Some kind of fancy fag lighter? Now get your arse out of here before I get really lairy.’

‘Right! That’s it! Gemma! Gemma – where are you? *Gemma!*’

‘I’m just getting out of the shower, Ken!’ called a faint voice from upstairs. ‘What’s going on down there?’

‘We’ve got an intruder! He won’t go so I’m calling the police!’

The man jabbed Kenneth in the breastbone, twice.

‘No, mate, you’ve got it wrong. *You’re* the one who’s leaving. You and whoever that bird is you’ve sneaked in upstairs.’

Kenneth started to prod at his phone, but even though the man didn’t appear to know what it was, he knocked it out of his hand and it clattered onto the floor.

Kenneth bent down to pick it up, but without any hesitation the man pushed him roughly against the side of the staircase, so that his head knocked against the newel post. He stood up straight again, dabbing at his right earlobe, and his fingertips came away with blood on them.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘You’re out.’

He had never been in a fight in his life, but he had taken three ju-jitsu lessons when he was working for Newham Council. He seized the lapels of the man’s overcoat and tried to swing him around so that he could force him along the hallway and out of the front door. But the man was far too heavy and far too strong, and he seemed almost to be glued to the floor. He pushed Kenneth again, even harder this time, so that Kenneth lost his grip on his lapels and fell over backwards.

As he tried to climb back up onto his feet, the man reached into his overcoat and tugged out a large black automatic pistol. Holding it in both hands, he pointed it directly up at Kenneth’s face and said harshly, ‘I warned you, didn’t I, mate? I fucking warned you! Don’t say I didn’t!’

He pulled the trigger and there was a deafening bang. Kenneth’s nose was blown inwards and the back of his head exploded, so that blood and glistening beige lumps of his brain tissue were sprayed up the striped wallpaper behind him.

‘What’s happening! What was that noise?’ screamed Gemma from the bedroom. *‘Ken – what’s happened?’*

Kenneth collapsed onto the floor, with gun smoke curling lazily above his head. As the man pushed his automatic back into his overcoat, he shook his head and tutted, as if he were disappointed that Kenneth had forced him to take such drastic action. Then he bent down, took hold of the collar of Kenneth’s anorak, and started to drag his body along the hallway.

Gemma had hastily wrapped herself in her pink dressing gown, and she came to the top of the stairs just as the man reached the front door.

'Stop!' she screamed. *'Stop!'*

The man stopped and turned around, staring back up at her. The expression on his face was enough to freeze her. Although he was so stocky, she was struck by how disproportionately short his legs were. He seemed to be wearing no shoes. In fact, he appeared to have no feet. When he turned back and started to bump Kenneth's body over the front step, she could see that his trouser turn-ups were trailing along the floor.

She stumbled down the stairs, but she was too late. The man had rolled Kenneth's body off the side of the brick steps that led up to the front door into the steeply sloping bed of japonica, and then walked off.

She rushed outside, too shocked and horrified even to scream anymore. She looked frantically up and down the street, but the pavements were deserted, and there was no sign of the man anywhere.

She dropped to her knees beside Kenneth's body, whispering, 'Ken... Ken... can you hear me?'

His face was a grisly mess, although his eyes were open. But then his body rolled over and she saw the back of his head and her whole world fell inwards.

2

‘I’m sincerely hoping you haven’t had your breakfast yet,’ said the lead crime scene investigator, leading them along the hallway.

He was totally bald with bulging green eyes and enormous ears, and in his baggy white Tyvek suit his head appeared to be too small for him. His name was Derek Grant, but Jerry had always thought that he looked like an alien from a 1950s sci-fi movie, so he called him the Martian.

‘Actually, I was planning on having beans on toast, but the bread had gone green,’ Jerry told him. He paused when they reached the living-room door and said, ‘It’s one of those, then, is it? A PYGU.’

‘Well, it’s unusual, I’ll give you that. I’ve never come across anything like it, and I’ve been doing this for fifteen years now.’

Edge said, ‘Maybe I’d better wait outside. I had chicken biryani.’

‘You’re having a laugh! For breakfast?’

‘I fell asleep last night before I’d finished my takeaway. Anyhow, I like cold curry.’

‘Jesus. I thought your breath was a bit on the ripe side. But don’t think you’re not coming in to see this too. If you puke your guts up, too bad.’

Two uniformed officers had met them outside when they arrived and had now followed them into the house. One of them said, ‘Puke your guts up? You will, mate. I guarantee it. I did. The return of the well-chewed bangers.’

The other one said, 'I thought DI Baker was handling this one.'

'He is, but he's been delayed,' said Jerry. 'He's just had a baby.'

'Freddy Baker? I didn't know he had it in him.'

'He didn't. His wife did.'

Jerry and Edge were already wearing plastic overshoes, but now they hooked surgical masks behind their ears. The Martian led them into the living room. The curtains were drawn but the living room and the dining room next to it were both brightly lit with LED spotlights on tripods.

'Blimey,' said Edge. 'This looks like my gran's house.'

The living room was wallpapered with brown chrysanthemums and furnished with a tired-looking brown sofa and two equally exhausted armchairs, as well as a coffee table with a frayed lace cloth draped over it. Above the brick fireplace hung a framed print of *The Singing Butler* by Jack Vettriano, a swanky couple dancing on a rainy beach while their maid and their butler held umbrellas up in the wind.

'Jesus,' said Jerry. 'That picture's enough to make me chuck up. My wife used to love it.'

'Victim's through here,' the Martian told him.

He pushed back the sliding glass door that separated the living room from the dining room. Three other investigators were standing around the dining-room table, two men and a woman, taking photographs and videos and making measurements. Jerry recognised the woman from several previous shouts, even though she was wearing a face mask. He wiggled his fingers at her, but she was too busy taking a picture of the victim's left arm to notice him.

'Gordon Bennett,' said Edge, and pressed his hand over his mask.

The victim was lying on her back on the table. She was naked, a white woman in her late thirties or early forties, Jerry would have guessed. She had frizzy hair, a dark ginger colour,

and a narrow plume of pubic hair the same colour. She was plumpish, with large breasts and a slightly sagging stomach, but she wasn't so fat that Edge would have described her as lardy.

There was no question how she had been killed, or what had been done to her before or after her death. Hopefully *after*, thought Jerry, for her sake. Her wrists and her ankles had been lashed to the table legs with nylon washing line, so that she would have been unable to struggle, no matter how much agony she was suffering.

Her throat had been cut, all the way down to her vertebra, so that her head had tilted back and her neck was gaping open. She had also been sliced from her face to her feet in a herringbone pattern, with deep diagonal incisions that went right through to the bone, each about two inches apart. Her breasts had been sliced in the same way, right down to her ribcage, like two jammy puddings.

She had bled copiously, although all of the blood had dried now, and that indicated to Jerry that she had probably been cut up while she was still alive.

'Body temperature indicates time of death around midnight last night,' said the Martian, his voice muffled behind his mask. 'She's been sexually assaulted, although there's no traces of semen. All we've been able to find so far is some footprints on the carpet and some gritty residue that may have been carried into the house on the soles of the perpetrator's shoes.'

'Do we have a name?'

'Yes,' said one of the uniformed officers, from behind him. 'Kathleen Hartley. Supply teacher, apparently, for Lavender Hill School. She's the daughter of the couple who own this house, and she's been staying here to look after it while they're on their holidays in Tenerife.'

'What else do we know about her? Is she married, or in some kind of partnership?'

‘Single. That’s all we’ve been able to find out so far. She shares a flat in Elsley Road with another teacher, but her flatmate’s away at the moment.’

‘Any idea when she was last seen alive?’

The officer shook his head. ‘She wasn’t needed at the school today, apparently. We’ve already had a word with the neighbours we met outside, but they hadn’t seen her for a couple of days.’

‘Oh, well. We’ll just have to do some door-to-door and check any CCTV. Most of the local shops have closed-circuit cameras.’

Jerry turned back to Kathleen Hartley’s body, with its bone-deep slices. He had seen victims who had been tortured by their murderers before, but he had never seen mutilation like this. He could have believed her assailant had been a butcher or a chef, because she looked as if she had been prepared for display in a butcher’s window, or for roasting in an oven.

‘Sorry, Jer, you’ll have to excuse me,’ said Edge, and let out a crackling burp. ‘I think the biryani’s on the way up.’

Jerry gave him a thumb’s up. He hadn’t eaten anything for breakfast himself, but the sight and the smell had brought up a mouthful of acidic, coffee-tasting bile. He had swallowed it back down again, but he could only hope that it was going to stay there. His stomach was clenching and unclenching as tightly as a bookmaker’s fist.

He looked around the dining room. Like the living room, it was wallpapered with faded brown flowers. Apart from the dining table and six mismatched dining chairs, the only other furniture was a cheap varnished sideboard and a spindly three-tier plant stand with two spider plants and a peace lily. Everybody in the room was reflected in a large distorting mirror that hung over the sideboard.

The woman investigator said, ‘Excuse me,’ and came around the end of the table with her camera to photograph Kathleen Hartley’s legs and feet. Jerry had to step back, and he bumped into the plant stand. He caught hold of it to stop it

falling over, but the peace lily pot tipped over and a bent cigarette end dropped out of it.

‘Here,’ he said to the Martian. ‘Somebody’s put out a fag end in here.’

The Martian came over and peered into the pot. ‘Yes, right, we’ll test that,’ he said. ‘Presumably the Hartleys aren’t smokers. There’s no ashtrays around here and the house doesn’t smell of smoke. It doesn’t look like our victim smoked either. No nicotine stains on her fingers, or her teeth.’

He asked the woman investigator to take several photographs of the cigarette end, and then he carefully picked it up with a pair of tweezers. Before he dropped it into a plastic evidence bag, he pulled down his mask and sniffed it.

‘Woof,’ he said. ‘That is one seriously pungent cigarette.’

He held it up so that Jerry could smell it too.

‘Blimey. I never smelled a fag like that before. That’s well ripe, that is.’

The Martian sealed the bag. ‘Geoff Baxter back at Lambeth Road, he’s your man when it comes to tobacco. He can tell you what brand of cigarettes you’ve been smoking as soon as you walk in the room, even if you haven’t got one on. He’ll know what this is. Plus, it’s bound to have saliva on it too, and that’ll give us a DNA sample.’

The woman investigator put down her camera and looked over at Jerry for the first time. Her eyes were as green as peeled grapes, and a few wisps of blonde hair protruded from her hood. He remembered that her name was Molly Something, and that when he had seen her without her mask she was snub-nosed and more than reasonably pretty.

‘Oh... DC Pardoe!’ she said. ‘Sorry – I didn’t see you come in.’

‘That’s what all the girls say.’

‘How have you been? Where are you stationed now they’ve closed Tooting?’

‘Lavender Hill. It’s okay, but it’s a pain in the arse getting there, whichever way you go, and the canteen’s crap.’

‘Haven’t seen you since – when? That Streatham Ice Rink shout?’

‘That’s right. That poor geezer who had his head bashed in with an ice skate.’ He paused, and then he said, ‘You and me ought to have a catch-up.’

‘That would be nice.’

He nodded towards Kathleen Hartley’s body. ‘What do you make of this? Ever seen anything like this before? Unbelievable. Looks like some kind of ritual sacrifice, doesn’t it?’

Molly Something shook her head. ‘I’ve seen victims cut up before, yes. Arms and legs and head chopped off and buried in the back garden in rubbish bags. That’s the usual MO. But not sliced up in a pattern like this. I mean, what was the point? Perhaps you’re right, Jim. Perhaps it *was* a ritual sacrifice, but it’s not like any ritual sacrifice that I’ve ever heard of.’

‘It’s Jerry.’

‘What is?’

‘My name. It’s Jerry, not Jim.’

‘Oh, sorry. I always thought it was Jim. You look so much like my fiancé’s brother, and he’s a Jim.’

‘You’re engaged, then?’

Before Molly Something could answer him, another uniformed officer came into the living room.

‘DC Pardoe? We’ve got ourselves a witness outside who saw the victim entering the house late last night with a male companion.’

‘Really? Okay. I’ll come out and have a word.’

‘His name’s Hugo,’ said Molly Something. Then, as if she needed to explain, ‘My fiancé.’

Jerry gave her a nod. He might have guessed she was engaged to some bloke called Nigel. The really pretty young women always are.

He took a long last look at Kathleen Hartley's mutilated body. He was trying to visualise what she had suffered when she was being deliberately sliced, one deep cut after another; and to grasp the mentality of anybody who could have inflicted such cruelty on her. He found it hard to come to terms with his own reaction to her murder too. It had left him sickened, but unusually numb, and he wondered if he ought to be feeling more shocked. Two weeks ago he had seen the body of a four-year-old boy in Battersea Park who had been strangled to death by his mother, and it had brought tears to his eyes.

He left the dining room and went outside into the street. It was only a quarter past three, but the smudgy grey clouds made it prematurely gloomy, and the street lights were already beginning to flicker on. He found Edge standing by the hedge outside the house, talking to a young black woman in a silver Puffa jacket. She had an explosive display of dreadlocks and a silver ring through her nose.

'This is Shantelle,' said Edge, as Jerry came up to them. 'Shantelle, this is Detective Constable Pardoe.'

'You all right, Edge?'

'Yeah, better now, thanks. Just don't take a butcher's behind that hedge. Shantelle – tell DC Pardoe what you told me.'

'What, right from the beginning?'

'If you don't mind.'

'We was coming back from a party at Sugar Cane, me and my friend Tamara. We left early because it was well boring. We was walking down Bennerley Road here and I sees this man and this woman standing outside the front door here. I didn't know who they was or nothing, but the man was holding on to the woman's arm and it looked like she was trying to pull herself away from him, like, do you know what I mean?'

‘Do you think they were having an argument?’

‘Well, yes. She was saying something to him but I couldn’t hear what it was. And she was tugging her sleeve off her shoulder like she was trying to take her coat off and get away from him.’

‘Did you or your friend try to intervene?’

‘Did we what?’

‘Did you ask her if she needed help?’

‘I suppose we should of. But we’d both had three Zombies and so we wasn’t too steady on our feet. Like, we was both of us carrying our shoes in case we fell over. In any case, we thought they was only having a domestic, like you said. Friday night, you always get couples having a row about something or other. And in any case the man looked well scary.’

‘What do you mean by “well scary”?’

‘Well, I know I was pissed, so maybe that had something to do with it. But when I looked back at him, I’d swear that he didn’t have no head.’

‘Sorry? He didn’t have a head? Maybe his coat collar was pulled up so it just looked like it.’

‘No,’ said Shantelle. ‘I swear to Jesus that he didn’t have a head. I wish I’d taken a photo of him now.’

‘I’ve been to Sugar Cane myself,’ said Edge. ‘Usually they restrict customers to two Zombies max.’

Jerry turned back to Shantelle. ‘Okay, so he didn’t have a head. Or he didn’t have a head that you could see. What was he wearing?’

‘I don’t know. Like a dark coat, that’s all.’

‘Given that he didn’t have a head, was he tall or short, would you say?’

‘He was as tall as she was. Maybe even a bit taller.’

‘Did you hang around to see what happened next? Did she manage to pull herself away from him?’

‘No. We didn’t want to get involved, like, do you know what I mean? But when we got to the corner we heard the front door bang, really loud, and when I looked back they was gone. I suppose they must have both gone inside.’

‘Okay, Shantelle, thanks for telling me this. You got this all recorded, Edge?’

Edge wagged his Sony voice recorder. ‘Every word, Jer. Both times.’

As Shantelle walked off, the Martian came out of the front gate of Kathleen Hartley’s house. He came up to them and held up a grey woollen scarf.

‘We found this in the front garden, right beside the porch. It’s definitely a man’s scarf, so it could have been dropped by our perp.’

‘It’s got a label on it,’ said Jerry. ‘What does it say?’

The Martian turned the scarf over and squinted at it. ‘Wellington and Smart. Never heard of them.’

‘Wellington and Smart?’ said Edge. ‘That used to be a big department store in Clapham. My granny used to shop there, but it was right next to the railway junction and it got bombed during the war. Quite a few shoppers got killed, so far as I know, including one of the owners. Either Wellington or Smart, I don’t know which.’

‘Didn’t they rebuild it? Or open up somewhere else?’

‘No. They went out of business. I think there’s an Argos there now.’

‘But that means this scarf must be eighty years old, minimum. Look at it though. It looks like brand-new, like it was bought only yesterday.’

‘We’ll check it for radiocarbon,’ said the Martian. ‘That’ll establish its age. We’ll test it for DNA too, of course. I should be able to give you a result in a day or so.’

The Martian went back into the house, leaving Jerry and Edge standing in the street. Jerry could see a Sky News van

parked on the corner, and half a dozen reporters being held back behind a police tape.

A reporter he knew from the *Sun* newspaper waved to him and called out 'DC Pardoe!' but he turned his back. He would rather wait for DI Baker to arrive and let him describe to the press what had been done to Kathleen Hartley. He didn't know if he could find the words.

'I tell you something, Edge. There's something distinctly weird about this case.'

'Weird? A woman sliced up like a packet of streaky bacon and a geezer with no bonce? No, mate. Nothing weird about that. Run of the mill. Sort of thing you come across every day in Lavender Hill.'

3

Yusuf was counting up the day's cash takings when the doorbell jangled. He heard a customer come in, although he couldn't immediately see who it was because of the high shelves that ran down the middle of his shop, stacked up with sweets and biscuits and packets of crisps.

He carried on counting as the customer approached the counter and stood behind the clear plastic screen that he had fixed up during the Covid pandemic. He didn't look up because he was only halfway through counting all the £10 and £20 notes he had taken today. There was still a fair amount of cash, even though most of his customers paid with credit cards or phone apps.

'One second,' he said.

'No, mate,' said the customer. 'You're going to serve me right now.'

'Let me just finish this counting, please.'

'You don't have to. I can tot it up meself later, can't I, when I get back to me gaff.'

Yusuf said to himself, 'Three hundred and twenty,' and then raised his eyes. He wasn't exactly sure what the customer had meant. His shop was threatened with robbery at least twice a month. Shopkeepers in Clapham were used to it. And most of the time, the would-be robbers were drunk or stoned or had such strong accents that he couldn't understand what they were saying.

'Come on, I ain't got all evening,' the customer insisted. 'Shove it over.'

But Yusuf was frozen, staring at the customer in disbelief. The man had a short haircut, faded up the side past his ears, and he was wearing a thick beige cable-knit sweater. What bewildered Yusuf was that he could see only half of him, his left half. He could see his left eye and the left side of his face, and he could see his left shoulder and his left arm. But he had no right side. He looked to Yusuf as if he had been cut clean in half, and his right half had dropped onto the floor, or he had left it outside in the street.

For a moment Yusuf wondered if this was an optical illusion, caused by the light behind the counter shining on the plastic screen. He tilted his head from one side to the other, but it made no difference. The customer was only half a man.

‘Are you going to give me that moolah or do I have to come over the counter and get it for meself, and give you a dry slap into the bargain?’

‘*Go away!*’ Yusuf shouted at him. It was almost a scream. He was terrified.

‘Give me that fucking moolah and I will!’

‘Go away! Go away! I call the police! You are on video!’

‘I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, sunshine, but you’ve asked for it!’

The man seized hold of the plastic screen and started to wrench it away from the top of the counter. He must have been holding both sides of it, yet Yusuf could see only his left hand. He pulled it again and again, so that it squeaked like an anguished animal, and at last he tore it away from its brackets and tossed it with a clatter onto the floor.

Yusuf pushed all the money towards him. ‘Take it! Take it! I am still calling the police!’

The man seized handfuls of notes and started to stuff them into his trouser pocket. Yusuf could see the notes that he was grabbing with his left hand, but some of the notes appeared to be crumpling up by themselves and disappearing into thin air.

Panting with fear, his heart beating as hard as a hammer, Yusuf picked up his phone. But before he could dial 999, the

man lunged across the counter and gripped his wrist. At the same time, a £20 note flew up from the counter and fluttered in front of Yusuf's face like a butterfly, almost touching the tip of his nose.

'What – the fuck – is this?' the man demanded. 'Are you having a Turkish?'

The man's left thumbnail was digging into his wrist so painfully that Yusuf could barely keep hold of his phone.

'What do you mean? I don't know what you mean.'

'I'm talking about this apple core, you melt! What is it, play money or something?'

'I still don't know what you mean.'

'Where's the real money? In the till is it still?'

'The till is empty. This *is* the real money! I don't understand what you're talking about!'

'You *melt!*' the man spat at him.

Yusuf tried to pull himself free, but the man was still gripping him too hard. They scuffled over the counter for a moment, with notes scattering onto the floor, but suddenly Yusuf felt a sharp, agonising pain in his right eye, as if he had been stabbed with the point of a nail file. His eyeball popped, and he was instantly blinded.

He let out a soulful cry, and tried to twist himself away, but then his left eye was stabbed, and that popped too, and everything went black. The man let go of his wrist, and Yusuf fell backwards, dropping his phone.

He crouched behind the counter for a few minutes, his chest heaving with pain and shock. He dabbed cautiously at his punctured eyes with his fingertips, and he could feel the gelatinous optical fluid sliding down his cheeks. He knew that he had lost his sight forever.

He groped for his phone, and found it at last, in the waste-paper bin. He prodded at the screen again and again, hoping that he could somehow call for help, but he had no response. After a few minutes he managed to climb up onto his feet, and

then feel his way around the end of the counter. He prayed that the half-man had left, because he hadn't heard the doorbell jangle. But he was able to shuffle his way across the shop with his hands held out in front of him, and even if the half-man was still there, he didn't speak or try to catch hold of him.

At last Yusuf reached the door, opened it, and stepped outside. He heard traffic and footsteps and the sound of a train as it clattered over the Clapham viaduct.

'Help me!' he screamed. *'Help me! Please! Somebody call for an ambulance!'*

Then he pitched forward onto the pavement, knocking his head against the kerb, and lay there shuddering.

*

It was beginning to grow light as DC Audrey Morrison arrived at St George's Hospital. Inside the Lanesborough Wing, the sister-in-charge of the Duke Elder ward was waiting for her, looking tired.

'Sorry I'm a bit late,' said Audrey. *'There was some kind of demonstration going on. Friends of the Planet or something like that. I can't say they're friends of any of the poor sods trying to get to work.'*

'Not to worry,' the sister-in-charge told her. *'I've been on my feet since three this morning and it gave me a chance to have a quick cup of tea. Let me take you up to ophthalmology.'*

They took the lift to the fifth floor. As they went up, Audrey saw the two of them reflected in the mirror and she couldn't help thinking that they looked like a television comedy act. She herself was tall and very thin, with a long face and heavy-lidded eyes that always made her appear to be bored with what any witness was telling her. Her grey raincoat hung on her bony shoulders as if it were hanging on the back of a chair.

Next to her, the sister-in-charge was short and bosomy, so that the buttons of her navy-blue uniform were straining, and the watch that was pinned to her left breast lay almost horizontal.

Audrey remained unsmiling. She took her work seriously, but she had always had an eye for the absurdities of life, and for the black humour that often accompanied tragedy. Last week she had arrested a gay schoolteacher who had murdered his partner for committing the unforgivable sin of putting their wooden spoons in the dishwasher.

They reached the fifth floor and walked along to the Duke Elder ward.

‘He was brought in about a quarter past eight last night,’ said the sister-in-charge, her shoes squeaking on the vinyl floor. ‘He was partly concussed, and in too much shock to tell us what had happened to him. He was suffering intense pain too.’

‘You said that he was blinded.’

‘That’s right. Both of his eyes have been punctured, with a total loss of vision. Mr Bhaduri examined him. He’s our senior ophthalmologist. In his opinion, the point of a knife or some similar object was stuck into his eyes. His right eye was open when he was wounded. His left eye was closed but the point penetrated the eyelid and went deep into the cornea.’

They had reached the doors of the ophthalmology ward, and the sister-in-charge paused outside.

‘We sedated him, so of course we had no way of telling how he was blinded until he woke up and was able to explain to us that he’d been attacked. That’s why we didn’t call you right away. It could have been nothing more than an accident. Over the years we’ve had dozens of cases of patients blinded by acid or metal splinters or flying glass. We’ve even had a number of cases of people deliberately blinding themselves for various reasons. Either they were hallucinating on drugs, or else they had some kind of psychiatric disorder.’

‘Is there any chance of saving his sight?’

‘Mr Bhaduri said that the damage is too severe. His eye sockets will have to be enucleated and he will be given ocular prostheses. What we used to call glass eyes, but of course they are plastic these days.’

‘Okay,’ said Audrey. ‘The reason I’m asking is that I don’t want to say anything to him that gives him false hope that he might be able to get his vision back.’

The sister-in-charge led her into the ward. There were six beds, three on each side, although only four of them were occupied and screened off. Yusuf was in the last bed, propped up on pillows, with thick white crepe bandages wrapped around his head. Through the window on the opposite side of the cubicle, Audrey could see the slate-grey sky and the slate-grey rooftops of the terraced houses opposite the hospital. Yusuf was blind to them now, and would never be able to see them, or anything else, ever again.

Audrey drew up a chair next to Yusuf’s bed and switched on her voice recorder.

‘Mr Nadeem? I’m Detective Constable Audrey Morrison from Lavender Hill. Can I call you Yusuf?’

Yusuf thumped the blanket with his fist. ‘I don’t know how you are going to catch this man. If he had not stabbed me in my eyes, I would think that he had been nothing but a dream.’

‘How are you feeling? Are you still in any pain?’

‘Only a throbbing feeling. And dizzy. Like when you dance around and around and suddenly stop.’

‘Why would you think this man was only a dream?’

‘Because not all of him was there.’

‘What do you mean by that? That he was stupid? Or behaving strangely?’

‘No, I mean that only half of him was there.’

‘I’m sorry, Yusuf. I still don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me.’

Yusuf paused for a few moments, breathing heavily. The sister-in-charge was sitting in a chair by the window, and she flapped her hand at Audrey as if to tell her to give him time.

‘I am in my shop,’ said Yusuf at last. Audrey could tell by the way he had tilted his head back that he was visualising

what had happened in his mind. ‘I am counting the takings for the day. This man comes in and stands looking at me through the Covid screen. I stop counting and I look up but there is only half a man. Like he has been cut in half, all the way down from his head to his feet, and there is only one side to him.’

‘Only half a man,’ Audrey repeated. If Yusuf had not been blinded, she would have given him a pencil and asked him to draw a picture for her.

‘You sound like you do not believe me,’ said Yusuf.

‘Yusuf – it is quite hard to believe, I’ll admit that. You’re sure this half a man wasn’t an optical illusion? He was standing behind this Covid screen, after all. Maybe it was a trick of the light.’

‘At first, that is what I thought myself. But then he broke down the screen so that he could take the money that I was counting, and he was still only half a man.’

‘Okay. Did you try to stop him taking the money?’

‘No, I said to take it.’

‘But if you were prepared to let him take it, why did he stab you in the eyes?’

‘He was angry about the money.’

‘Why? Didn’t he think there was enough of it?’

‘No. He said it wasn’t real. He asked me if it was play money. I suppose like toy money for children.’

‘And then he stabbed you in the eyes? Did you see what he stabbed you with?’

‘No. I only felt it. I don’t remember much after that.’

Audrey sat back. ‘Half a man,’ she mused yet again. ‘Could you describe him, even though you could only see half of him?’

‘White. Short haircut. And he spoke like Cockney. He called the money “moolah”.’

‘What was he wearing?’

‘A sweater. Thick, like a fisherman sweater.’

‘But only half a sweater?’

‘Yes. Only half. Left half.’

‘Was there anything else about him that you remember? Any smell of drink, perhaps? Or cigarettes, or body odour, or aftershave?’

Yusuf shook his head. ‘I know you think that I am making this up, or that I was asleep and I was dreaming it, or that I am crazy. But I swear to you on my mother’s grave that what I am telling you is true. He was only half a man.’

Audrey thanked him and reached across to give his hand a reassuring squeeze. Then she left the ward, with the sister-in-charge following close behind her. As they waited for the lift, Audrey said, ‘Any chance of a psychiatric assessment?’

‘Yes. I’ll arrange it. After what I heard him telling you, I think it might be a good idea. When he first said he was attacked, I believed him. But by half a man? We might still be considering a case of self-harm.’

Audrey was about to make a grim joke about sending out half a search party, but she kept it to herself.

4

Jerry was eating a cheese baguette at his desk when Detective Chief Inspector Herbert Chance came in.

‘Don’t like to interrupt your lunch, Pardoe, but I’m beginning to think there’s something funny going on.’

‘Sorry, guv? Funny? Funny peculiar or funny ha-ha?’

DCI Chance closed his eyes for a moment as if he were praying that he hadn’t heard that. Then he said, ‘I saw your preliminary report about the homicide at Bennerley Road and how the witness said she saw a man who appeared to be decapitated.’

Jerry brushed crumbs from his keyboard. ‘Yes, well. She wasn’t what you would have called a reliable witness. And she admitted herself that she was well under the influence when she saw him.’

‘Fair enough. But then Simon Fairbrother’s been investigating that fellow who was shot yesterday afternoon at Bolingbroke Grove. The fellow’s wife came downstairs in time to see the shooter dragging his body out of the front door, and *she* swears that he had no feet.’

‘Blimey, guv. Sounds like there’s a gang of amputees on the rampage.’

‘It’s not *that* kind of funny, Pardoe. Not to say not very tasteful. But that isn’t all. To top it off, I’ve just had a report from Audrey Morrison about a shopkeeper from Clapham who was assaulted last night just before he was about to close. Attempted robbery, although nothing was taken. During the assault he was blinded in both eyes. Morrison interviewed him at St George’s this morning, and when she asked him to

describe his assailant, he told her that only half of him was visible.’

‘What, was he hiding behind a shelf or something?’

‘No, nothing like that. Morrison said that in his own words, he was literally only half a man. The left half, no right half.’

‘What? I don’t get it.’

‘Well, neither do I, if you must know. But apparently he was absolutely adamant, and Morrison couldn’t see any reason why he shouldn’t be telling her the truth. She suggested that they give him a psychiatric test, just to make sure that he isn’t doolally, but in her own opinion he’s perfectly sane.’

Jerry put down his baguette and lifted his fingers, counting off three of them.

‘So we’re looking for a man with no head, a man with no feet, and a man who’s missing the right side of his body? Have we told the press about this yet? They’ll love it.’

‘No, we haven’t, and we’re not going to. At least, not until we find out whether all or any of these assaults are connected, and not until we find out what the hell is going on. If it had been only two similar statements, I could have put it down to witnesses simply misinterpreting what they saw. But *three*. And all within less than a day.’

Jerry could detect an air of tension in Herbert Chance’s voice. He always talked in short, clipped tones, like an army colonel, and with his sandy hair and his bristly moustache, he looked like an army colonel too. But last month, two of his undercover detectives had been caught having affairs with the wives of the drug dealers they were investigating, and even though Herbert Chance hadn’t personally been aware of their misconduct, he was the officer in charge of the operation and he had been officially reprimanded. Now he was talking like an army colonel who was afraid of being blindsided yet again, and being demoted.

Edge looked up from his desk on the other side of the room. By the way he had one eyebrow lifted, Jerry could tell that he had guessed what DCI Chance was going to say next.

Herbert Chance cleared his throat. 'I've been told that you have some experience of investigating what you might call outré cases. You and DS Patel, from Redbridge, working as a team. That's what Superintendent Balfour informed me, anyway.'

Jerry finished chewing, and swallowed. 'You could say that, guv, yes. They weren't well publicised, those cases. The Commissioner didn't want the media to get the impression that the Met was a branch of *Ghostbusters*, do you know what I mean?'

'But that was the kind of thing you were dealing with?'

'Sort of. DS Patel knows a lot about spooks and spirits and demons and stuff. You might say a hell of a lot. She was brought up in Pakistan, where they believe in all that. And, yes. We did handle a couple of very weird cases together, and all that spooky knowledge of hers was more than handy, I have to admit.'

'There was one case that involved cannibalism, I believe.'

'Don't remind me. Not while I'm eating, anyhow.'

Herbert Chance cleared his throat again. 'What I'd like you to do, Pardoe, is to contact DS Patel so that the two of you can take an overall look at these three cases we're dealing with now. If there *is* a connection, then we need to find out what it is. And soon as possible, before we get any more incidents like it.'

'But if we can't find any connection?'

'In that case, we're probably dealing with three witnesses who all happened to be drunk, or high, or hallucinating.'

'That's the most likely explanation, if you ask me,' put in Edge. 'Remember that woman who got herself run over and killed a couple of weeks ago on Battersea Rise? One of the witnesses swore that the car that knocked her down was being driven by a clown.'

'Don't worry, sir,' said Jerry. 'I'll get hold of DS Patel and we'll try to find out what the SP is. I'll have a word with Audrey Morrison when she gets back.'

‘But keep this to yourselves,’ said Herbert Chance. ‘If word of this gets out, we’re going to look even more like clowns than that chap your witness saw driving that car.’

*

Jerry called Jamila on a video link. She was standing by the window of her office in Ilford police station, looking down at the High Street. It had stopped raining, but the window was still glittering with raindrops. He hadn’t seen her in five months and he saw that she had cut her hair shorter, at a slant, which made her look younger. She was wearing a tight turquoise sweater with a high collar, and a sparkly hummingbird brooch.

‘Nice to see you again, Sarge,’ he told her.

‘Well, it’s good to see you too, Jerry. But don’t tell me this is just a social call.’

‘No, I’m afraid not. We’ve had three incidents down here at Lavender Hill, all within twenty-four hours. They’re going to bring in a team from Specialist Crime, but DCI Chance thinks it would be a good idea if you and me got together and looked into them a bit further.’

‘What are you talking about? What kind of incidents?’

‘Two homicides. A bloke who was shot and a woman who was pretty well cut to pieces. And then there’s a shopkeeper who had both his eyes poked out during an attempted robbery.’

‘Very nasty. But why are you calling me about them?’

‘It seems like there could be a link between them, that’s why. Kind of a weird link. Chancey’s been told about us working together and wants us to see if we can find any connection.’

‘I’m really tied up at the moment. There’s been a wave of religious violence up here. I expect you’ve heard about that arson attack on the Redbridge gurdwara.’

‘I didn’t know gurdwaras were inflammable. What’s a gurdwara when it’s at home?’

‘A Sikh temple, Jerry. Somebody threw a petrol bomb into it and three worshippers were badly burned.’

‘Okay. But can you at least manage to come down and have a bit of a chat with me and Audrey Morrison and Simon Fairbrother? I’m handling the woman who got all cut up, and they’ve been assigned to the other two cases.’

‘When you say there’s a “weird connection”, what exactly do you mean?’

‘We’re not at all sure, to be honest with you. Which is why we need you to come down and talk it over. None of us are sure if it’s really spooky or whether it’s nothing more than a case of three witnesses with the heebie-jeebies.’

Jamila listened with a frown while Jerry told her how Yusuf and Shantelle and Kenneth’s wife, Gemma, had all described assailants who appeared to have parts of their bodies missing.

She thought for a moment, and then she said, ‘Do you know what this sounds like? It sounds like jinn. In Pakistan there is a belief that there is another world that is parallel to ours, and that this world is inhabited with spirits called jinn.’

‘Yes, well I’ve heard of jinn. You mean like genies? You rub the lamp and they come out and grant you three wishes.’

‘Not exactly like that. These spirits actually live among us, in our houses. Our worlds and their worlds overlap, although they prefer the dirtier parts of the house, like the toilet. That is why many Pakistanis will say a word of prayer before they enter the bathroom and apologise when they leave.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me. Sergeant Shilmani at Tooting, he should have apologised when he left the bathroom, I can tell you. You couldn’t go in there afterwards without a gas mask.’

‘Why I say that your witness reports sound like jinn is because many people in Pakistan say that they have seen the jinns in their houses, but because the jinns live in another world, as I told you, they have seen only part of them. My grandmother Sufiya said she saw a woman in a hijab making her way along her corridor, but this woman was visible only from the waist upwards – as if she was wading through a lake.’

‘Blimey. But I don’t think we’re going to be looking for jinns here, Sarge. Not unless there’s such a thing as Cockney jinns. The shopkeeper Yusuf, he was Pakistani, but even he said that the geezer who blinded him spoke like a local. But – you know – there might be something in this parallel world idea.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean we’re probably not talking about an actual parallel world. Not a real one. But I was reading the other day about demonic possession. You know, like *The Exorcist*. And this article reckoned that people who believe they’re possessed by demons are actually suffering from schizophrenia. So maybe these witnesses imagined they could see people from another world, like your gran did. But it’s kind of a mental thing.’

‘But is it likely that *three* of them shared the same kind of delusion, all within the space of twenty-four hours?’

‘Maybe it’s catching, like Covid. But I still think it would be useful if you could come down and talk this over. In fact, Chancey is going to insist on it, so it’s what you might call an order.’

‘Very well,’ said Jamila. ‘I can come down tomorrow morning. Say about eleven?’

‘Perfect,’ Jerry told her. She turned away from the window and he was saw again how attractive she was, with those wide black agate eyes and those full, slightly pouting lips. As far as Jerry was concerned, there had always been something magical about her, and it wasn’t only her knowledge of spirits and demons and the supernatural. But she was a sergeant and he was a constable and they were both Met detectives and apart from that she had never given him any indication that she might secretly fancy him.

‘How’s your Linda?’ she asked him, as if she could telepathically sense what he was thinking.

‘Oh, we’re having a bit of a rest from each other, as a matter of fact.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, don’t be. She was beginning to talk about wedding bells and looking up the price of confetti and I’m not sure I’m ready for any of that yet. Especially in this job.’

‘I see. Well, I’m still sorry. I think you would make some woman a very amusing husband.’

‘It’s twenty-three pounds ninety-nine, if you’re interested.’

‘What is?’

‘Biodegradable confetti. The twenty-guest size.’

5

Mary Jonas was collecting drawing paper from the stationery cupboard when she heard screaming coming from the direction of her classroom. Next, she heard a torrent of children's feet running along the corridor.

She dropped the sheaf of paper onto one of the shelves and stepped out of the cupboard, just in time to collide with three of her Year Two pupils, all wide-eyed and plainly in a panic. The rest of the fifteen-strong class was following them, some of them crying, and all of them looking distressed.

'What is it? What's happened?'

'There's *legs!*' gasped Naomi French, while the other boys and girls gathered around her. They were all looking back towards the classroom doorway, as if they were expecting something frightening to come out of it. Mary had never seen them so agitated.

'Hey, shush!' she said, trying to calm them down. 'What do you mean, legs?'

'On the ceiling, miss!' put in Michael Jarrett. 'They was walking across the ceiling!'

'Hey, hey, hey,' said Mary. 'Let's all settle down now. What do you mean they were walking across the ceiling?'

One of the younger boys started to moan, and two or three of the girls began to sob.

Michael Solomon held up his hand with two fingers pointing downwards like legs and imitated a walking motion.

'They was hanging down from the ceiling, miss, and they went all the way across the room. With shoes on.'

A door opened further along the corridor and another teacher looked out – June Peascod, who taught Year Five.

‘Mary? What’s going on?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Mary told her. ‘The children say they saw something that frightened them. I’m just going to try and find out what it was.’

She turned back to her class and said, ‘You all stay here. I’m going to take a look and make sure that they’re gone, these legs, or whatever they were.’

‘It’s all right,’ said June. ‘I’ll keep an eye on them. Why don’t you all line up, children, and be as quiet as mice, while Ms Jonas sees what upset you. It wasn’t a spider, was it?’

‘It was legs,’ Michael Solomon piped up. ‘It was legs on the ceiling.’

‘Legs,’ June repeated. She was clearly baffled.

Mary walked back along the corridor to the Year Two classroom. Before she went inside, she leaned in through the doorway and peered up at the ceiling. There were no legs up there, though, not as far as she could see. Only two fly-speckled fluorescent lights and a brown damp stain.

She looked around the classroom. Books and crayons were scattered all over the children’s tables and crayons were strewn on the floor, as well as a sandwich box that had burst open so that an apple had rolled out.

‘Hallo?’ she said, although she didn’t really know why, because she couldn’t see anybody there.

She stepped cautiously into the classroom and crossed over to her desk. She opened the drawer to make sure her purse and her keys were still there, and then closed it. She looked up at the ceiling again, trying to think what it was that the children had actually seen, and why it had frightened them so much.

Perhaps it had been some sort of optical illusion. Triangles of sunlight were shimmering on the ceiling, reflected from the puddles in the playground outside. But how could that have

looked like legs hanging down? Legs – as Michael Solomon had said – with shoes on?

She wasn't sure what she should do next. If she told the children to return to the classroom and carry on as normal, would that make them feel that she hadn't believed them? But if she told them all to go home in case the legs appeared again, would they be too frightened to come back to that classroom – not only tomorrow, or the next day, but ever?

And even if there actually had been legs, and they returned, how much of a threat could they be? What harm could legs possibly do to you, especially if they were up on the ceiling?

She decided that she had better have a word with Sheila Daventry, the head teacher. It was the children's parents she was worried about, more than anything. The parents were so aggressive these days. If she told the children to return to the classroom and any of them were still so frightened that they became hysterical, she would inevitably have some furious father marching into the school tomorrow and screaming at her. Then again, if she told the whole class to go home, it was only eleven-thirty in the morning and many of the parents were at work. She would have to contact all of them and explain that she was sending their sons and daughters home early because they had seen legs walking across the ceiling. They would think she had lost her mind.

There was an empty classroom upstairs. Maybe she should take them all up there, at least until the school's handyman had given this classroom a thorough check, to make sure the ceiling was safe. What if the 'legs' had been the first signs that it was going to collapse?

June appeared in the doorway.

'Everything all right, Mary?'

'I really don't know. There's no doubt that the kids were all scared by something, but I can't for the life of me work out what it actually was. I've been thinking of having a word with Ms D before I decide what to do next.'

‘Well, look, they’re getting very restless out there in the corridor, and I’m trying to hold an end-of-term geography test. Unless you’re going to call them all back in here again, I thought I’d send them out to play.’

‘Yes. Good idea. Thanks, June.’

Once June had gone, Mary took out her phone and called her husband, Samuel, who worked as a chef for the Turtle Bay Caribbean restaurant in Brixton. She rang and rang but he didn’t answer, so she assumed he was out shopping for ingredients in Brixton Market, or too busy chopping peppers.

As she put down her phone, she heard a soft crackling sound. At first she thought it had started to rain again, but then she looked up and saw that from the far corner of the classroom, hairline splits were starting to spread across the ceiling. They were slowly forming a spiderweb pattern, wider and wider.

Mary left her desk and made her way between the tables to stare up at the ceiling. She watched in bewilderment as the spiderweb pattern crept out as far as the first fluorescent light and then stopped. For a long moment there was silence in the classroom, although she could faintly hear the school choir singing in the main hall, and the leaden thumping of Ms Cartwright’s piano.

Then a man’s feet appeared out of the ceiling, in worn brown leather shoes. Mary gasped, pressing her hand to her heart and stumbling backwards, so that she collided with the table behind her and sent even more crayons dropping onto the floor.

‘*June!*’ Mary called out. ‘*June, come quick!*’

She started to scramble back between the tables to the door, but then she stopped, and looked back – terrified, but mesmerised too.

Step by downward step a man appeared, as if he were descending into the classroom by means of an invisible staircase. He was wearing a tight grey flannel suit, with a maroon waistcoat underneath it, and a grey tweed cap. Behind

and above him, the spiderweb pattern in the ceiling faded away.

He reached the floor and tugged at the sleeves of his jacket. Then he pushed aside the tables and came up to face Mary as if his descent from the ceiling had been as normal as walking into the classroom through the door.

Mary was shivering with fright. The man was built like a bouncer, well over six feet tall, with grey stone-coloured eyes, an S-shaped broken nose, and stubble. He smelled of body odour, and some kind of cologne.

‘Who are you?’ Mary asked him, although she felt completely unreal, as if she were about to faint. ‘How did you do that?’

‘Never mind who I am,’ the man replied. ‘What are *you* doing here?’

‘I’m one of the teachers here.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I mean, what’s a black woman doing here in Clapham?’

‘What? What are you talking about? Listen, I’m going to call the police.’

‘No, you’re not, love. You’re coming with me.’

The man took a step forward, and Mary took two steps back.

‘Get away from me. Don’t you dare touch me. I don’t know how you managed to get in here, but you have to leave. Do you hear me?’

The man grinned and shook his head. ‘Do you know who you’re talking to? You don’t have the first bleeding idea, do you? You’re a teacher in Clapham and you’ve never heard of Railway Ronnie? Perhaps it’s because you’re Jamaican, or whatever.’

Mary turned around and tried to make a run for the door, but the man seized the neck of her jumper, yanking her roughly back and twisting her around so that she lost her balance and fell onto the floor. She knocked her shoulder against a table

leg and for a few seconds she was winded and couldn't catch her breath, but then the man climbed on top of her, pinning her down, and she filled her lungs and started to scream.

'Shut your gob, will you?' the man hissed at her, and clamped his left hand over her mouth. His fingers against her lips felt as rough as sandpaper and tasted of nicotine.

She shook her head furiously from side to side, and managed to let out a muffled cry, but then the man slapped her so hard across the side of her head that she was stunned.

'I told you to shut your gob, didn't I? You're a teacher, aren't you? Don't you fucking understand English?'

He climbed back onto his feet, took hold of her right arm and dragged her across the classroom floor, bumping into table legs and rolling over crayons. They had almost reached the opposite wall when his feet disappeared into the floor, as if there were a staircase there too, but leading downwards, into some non-existent basement. His legs followed, and when he had sunk up to his waist, he started to pull Mary down after him. Although she was still half concussed, she struggled to get free from him, but he sank deeper and deeper into the parquet floor, relentlessly pulling her down with him. She gave one last strangled cry and then she disappeared completely, and for a few seconds all that was visible was the man's head, with its grey tweed cap, as if he had been decapitated and his head had dropped onto the floor. But then his head too was swallowed up, and the classroom was deserted.

After ten minutes or so, June Peascod appeared in the doorway.

'Mary? Where are you? It's starting to rain so I've had to let your class back in again.'

Frowning, she walked into the middle of the classroom.

'Mary?' she repeated. She sniffed, and she was sure that she could smell cigarettes, and something else, like lavender.

The rain began to patter hard against the windows.

*

June hurried along to Sheila Daventry's office to tell her that something strange had frightened the children in Year Two and that Mary had disappeared.

Sheila Daventry put down the Cornish pasty she was eating as a late breakfast, brushed down her tartan tweed skirt, and followed June along the corridor so that she could look around the classroom for herself. She found Mary's phone on her desk and picked it up. She saw an email from Amazon saying that her order of a new jumper would be delivered tomorrow and a WhatsApp message from her husband, Samuel, saying 'Did you ring me?'

'This is *very* peculiar,' said Sheila Daventry. 'No matter where she's gone, she wouldn't leave her phone behind.'

'Perhaps she didn't feel well,' June suggested. 'I'll go and take a look in the staff room. What shall we do with her class?'

'Well, I don't think they should come back in here for the moment. We can send them up to that empty room upstairs. I'll get one of the girls from Year Five to hand out drawing paper and crayons to keep them busy.'

Sheila Daventry paused, frowning. 'If you can't find Mary in the staff room, go outside and see if her car's still there. If it is, come back and tell me and I'll ask Bryan to help us search the whole school. I must say this is most disturbing. Mary hasn't seemed to be at all stressed lately, has she?'

She looked around the classroom again. 'What was it that frightened the children so much?'

'I couldn't really understand it,' June told her. 'They said that they saw legs walking across the ceiling.'

Sheila Daventry shook her head in bewilderment. 'I don't know! The things that children imagine sometimes! Mind you, when I was a girl, I believed there was a ghostly cat in my wardrobe, and in the middle of the night I was sure I could hear it meowing for someone to let it out.'

June went off to the staff room while Sheila Daventry took Mary's phone and went along the corridor to usher Year Two

to the empty classroom upstairs. After they had all taken their seats, she thought about asking them to describe these 'legs' in more detail, but she could tell by their worried faces and their lack of chatter that they were still upset, and so she decided to leave it until later.

Michael Solomon put up his hand and said, 'Is Mrs Jonas coming to teach us? She was going to tell us what to draw.'

'I expect she'll be coming up later,' said Sheila Daventry. 'Meanwhile – let's see. Perhaps you could draw me some rabbits. I'm having some paper and crayons sent up for you. Yes. You could draw rabbits at play. Or baby rabbits. Whatever you like.'

She went along to Year Five to arrange for one of the older girls to bring them drawing materials. John Meredith, the Year Five teacher, could see that she was worried.

'What's going on?' he asked her. 'There's been quite a commotion outside.'

'It's Mary. She's gone missing. Well, I don't know if she's gone missing or if she felt ill or she's simply walked out.'

'Really? She seemed perfectly all right when I talked to her this morning.'

'I know. That's why I'm concerned.'

As Sheila Daventry was returning to her office, June caught up with her. She was out of breath.

'She's not in the staff room and she's not in the medical room and she's not in the ladies and her car's still parked outside.'

'Right. In that case, we need to search the whole school. I'll go and ask Bryan to help us.'

Bryan was the school caretaker. Sheila Daventry hurried through the rain to his hut and found him inside, smoking a roll-up cigarette and tinkering with the disassembled pieces of a lawnmower engine.

'Mary Jonas has gone missing, Bryan. We don't know where, or why. Her car's still here so we think that she

couldn't have gone far. Do you think you can scout around the grounds and see if there's any sign of her? Maybe you can start with the sports pavilion.'

Bryan looked at the raindrops dribbling down the window. 'She could have picked a better day for it.'

'I'm concerned for her safety, Bryan. This is not like her at all.'

'Don't you worry. If she's anywhere to be found, I'll find her.'

Sheila Daventry returned to the main building. It would be lunchtime soon and all the corridors would be filled with children, so she wanted to search as much of the school as she could before the bell rang. Both June and John Meredith were waiting for her. John Meredith had left his class with instructions to read the next chapter in their set book, *Who Let the Gods Out?*, while June's class were still finishing their geography test.

'Right,' said Sheila Daventry. 'If you two can search downstairs, I'll go upstairs. Look everywhere, even if it seems unlikely. She could be hiding in a cupboard as far as we know. Do you remember that boy last year, what was his name, Dennis Watts? We thought he'd run away but he was lying on the top shelf in the library.'

'Dennis Watts, who could forget him?' said John Meredith. 'He was a living argument for bringing back corporal punishment.'

*

They split up and searched the entire school: the library and the kitchens and the storage space underneath the stage, and they even looked up in the attic. Bryan checked the boiler room, and then he went over to the sports pavilion, although that was locked. On his way back he looked behind the bicycle sheds and found a dead hedgehog.

After half an hour they met back together in Sheila Daventry's office. She had at last managed to get in touch with Mary's husband, Samuel, and tell him that she was missing.

He said that he would leave the restaurant and come over to the school right away.

‘I’m going to call the police,’ said Sheila Daventry. ‘I’m hoping I’m wrong, but I have a really bad feeling about this.’

‘You say the children were talking about legs walking across the ceiling,’ said John Meredith. ‘I can’t understand that at all, but do you think that has anything to do with it?’

‘I really don’t know. I don’t understand it myself. I didn’t like to ask them about it because they were all so frightened. Perhaps the police will be able to get some more out of them.’

June was standing by the window, looking out.

‘What’s that smoke?’ she said. ‘Bryan, have you lit a bonfire?’

‘What, while it’s pissing down with rain?’ said Bryan. ‘Leave it out.’

‘Well, somebody’s got a bonfire going. Look.’

Bryan joined her by the window. Over on the far side of the sports field, thick grey smoke was rising.

‘I don’t know who’s lit that, but I’ll give them what-for when I find out. I’ve only just finished those new line-markings. If they’ve been and gone and buggered them up, I can tell you—’

He left Sheila Daventry’s office and June could see him striding across the sports field in the rain. As he approached the source of the smoke, though, he stopped, and stood staring at it for almost half a minute. Then he turned around and came back, and this time he was running at a gallop. June could see by the grim expression on his face that he had seen something that had shaken him badly.

He came bursting back through the office door.

‘I think it’s her!’ he gabbled. ‘Over there! That fire! I think it’s Mary Jonas!’

Sheila Daventry was talking on the phone, but said, ‘Please – just a moment,’ and lowered it, and said, ‘What? What do

you mean?’

‘Is that the cops you’re calling?’ Bryan asked her. ‘Tell them to come here quick! I mean, like urgent! I think that’s Mary Jonas! I recognised her bracelet!’

Sheila Daventry lifted her phone again. ‘Sorry about that – but I think something very serious might have happened. Yes, to our missing teacher. Can you send someone over as soon as you possibly can?’

Then she said to Bryan, ‘You’d better show us,’ although she kept her phone to her ear.

They all left the office and walked quickly across the field. The rain had eased to a fine, persistent drizzle, which made the day seem grey and ghostly. Smoke was still billowing up into the air, and as they came nearer to the source of the fire they found they were breathing in a sweet charred smell.

A human body was lying on the grass. There was no doubt that it was a human body, but none of them had ever seen a human body as devastated as this one. All the skin on her face had been burned into blackened flakes, so that her teeth were bared in a hideous lipless grin, while her eyes were as blind as two eggs. Her ribcage had been crushed into a criss-cross pattern of splintered bones, all sticking like knitting needles out of her crumpled lungs and her shrivelled liver. Her blistered beige intestines were overflowing from the basin of her pelvis. One of her legs had been cracked right back so that its heel was pressed against her hip, while the other leg had been broken off at the knee, and was lying over three feet away.

‘Oh my good God,’ said Sheila Daventry, and turned her back.

June stood staring at the body, with her hand cupped over her mouth, but at last she said, ‘You’re right. That’s Mary’s bracelet.’

One of Mary’s arms was folded across her mangled chest, and on her wrist was a bracelet made of tiny white seashells.

Mary had bought it on her last holiday in Barbados, as a souvenir of her family heritage.

‘How in the name of heaven was that done to her?’ said John Meredith. His voice sounded haunted. ‘It looks like she’s been run over by a train. And how can she be burning like this?’

‘I’ll go and fetch a bucket of water,’ said Bryan.

‘No,’ said Sheila Daventry. ‘Leave her as she is. If you throw water over her, you might destroy some evidence.’

June’s eyes filled with tears. ‘She was such a lovely woman. Always smiling. Always laughing. Her kids loved her. Who could possibly have hated her enough to do this to her?’

6

‘If you ask me,’ said Edge, ‘what these witnesses say they’ve seen, they’re nothing but figleaves of their imagination.’

Audrey said, ‘I don’t know. That shopkeeper who had his eyes poked out, Yusuf, he was absolutely sure the man who attacked him was only half a man.’

‘Yes, but come on. You know how often witnesses think they’ve seen something completely different from what was actually there, or how often they make something up because they think that’s what we want to hear. A geezer with no head and a geezer with no feet and only half a geezer. Do me a favour.’

It was half past eleven, and DCI Chance had convened a meeting in his office between Simon Fairbrother and Audrey Morrison and Jerry and Edge, and only a few minutes after they had started, Jamila had arrived. She looked unusually flustered, and her collapsible umbrella had been blown inside out, so that it was hanging from her arm like a wet dead crow.

‘Honestly, the weather today! And those *disgusting* Tube trains! I’m going to drive next time, forget about the traffic! At least I won’t be sitting next to some filthy builder eating a McDonald’s!’

‘Good to see you, DS Patel,’ said Herbert Chance, standing up. ‘We’ve only just started. Do you want to take a seat next to DC Pardoe? Seeing that the point of this meeting is to bring you two together. The Ghost Busters, as I think they call you.’

‘I would prefer it if you didn’t,’ Jamila told him, as she shook out her raincoat and hung it up. ‘We have investigated some unusual cases, yes, but there is no such thing as ghosts.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Edge. ‘That skinny old bloke that cleans the toilets – Henry – he came out of a cubicle last night holding up his mop and he practically scared the number two out of me. If *he’s* not a ghost, he’s the nearest thing to it.’

Herbert Chance testily cleared his throat. ‘Let’s consider these investigations seriously, shall we? We have two homicides and one grievous assault that led to the victim losing his sight. In each case, a witness claimed that the suspect who may have been responsible for the offence was missing a part of their person. Simon, do you want to tell us what your witness saw?’

Simon Fairbrother reminded Jerry of his old geography teacher, who had always buried his chin in his neck and spoken in a low, relentless drone that you had to strain to hear. He turned over his notes and said, ‘The witness in this case was Mrs Gemma Treagus. She was upstairs when she heard her husband being shot in the hallway of their house in Bolingbroke Grove. She came downstairs to see her husband’s assailant pulling his body out through the front door. She was adamant that his assailant appeared to have no feet.’

‘Perhaps his trousers were too long and they were simply covering his shoes,’ Jamila suggested.

‘No. Not as far as she could tell. And his legs appeared disproportionately short for his body, with the distance from his hips to his knees being noticeably longer than the distance from his knees to the floor.’

‘I see,’ said Jamila, and jotted that down.

Jerry then recounted Shantelle’s evidence about the man who had been seen with Kathleen Hartley outside her parents’ house in Bennerley Road – the man with no head.

‘We did take her evidence with a pinch of salt, though, because she wasn’t entirely sober. In fact, she was pissed as a handcart. But she swore on her life that the bloke had no bonce.’

‘And Audrey? Tell DS Patel how your victim described the man who poked out his eyes.’

Audrey Morrison held up both hands. ‘Poor Yusuf. It’s really hard to say if what he saw was real. Perhaps it was some sort of optical illusion, or it could be that his recollection of the man who attacked him was somehow distorted, because he was blinded. I once had a rape victim who was convinced that the man who violated her had only one arm and only one leg, because he had pushed her so hard sideways up against a wardrobe. Of course she was in total shock.’

‘But this Yusuf?’ asked Jamila. ‘He saw only half a man?’

‘That’s right. Only his left half. Almost as if his right half was hidden behind a full-length mirror, or a wall.’

Herbert Chance said, ‘What is causing us such concern is that all three of these incidents occurred within twenty-four hours, and within less than half a mile of each other. I agree that all three assaults were totally different. A shooting, an extremely sadistic homicide, and a blinding. Yet they all have this one common denominator. For some unaccountable reason, part of each perpetrator’s body was invisible.’

Jamila said, ‘It may be worthwhile our talking again to the witnesses, just Jerry Pardoe and me. I have already told Jerry that in Pakistan we have stories about jinns – spirits who live in a world that is parallel to ours. Sometimes they can be seen. Sometimes they can’t be seen at all. On other occasions you might see only part of them – their face, or their arm, or their body from the waist up.’

‘But you don’t think that anything like that is happening here?’

‘They’re just legends, aren’t they?’ put in Edge. ‘You know, like fairy stories.’

‘I always keep an open mind,’ Jamila told him. ‘What is imaginary to one person can be real to another. Some people believe in God. Others dismiss *Him* as a fairy story.’

‘Well, then,’ said Herbert Chance. ‘If you think you might get more sense out of our three witnesses, by all means go ahead and arrange some more interviews. In the case of Mrs Treagus, you might have to contact her solicitor first.’

‘Very well. If you can give me their contact details.’

It was then that there was a quick, staccato knock at the door, and the duty sergeant opened it up before Herbert Chance could tell him to come in.

‘Sorry to interrupt you, sir, but we’ve had an emergency call from the principal at Brookwood School. Apparently, one of their teachers went missing but now they’ve found her body on the school playing fields. The principal told me that she’s been seriously injured and her body’s been burned.’

Herbert Chance stood up. ‘Right, then. We’ll get somebody out there right away. Simon, do you want to take this one over? You can take DS Lang and DC Williams with you. The magistrates postponed that arson hearing so I believe they’re both free at the moment. And we’ll need to alert forensics.’

‘She said something else, the principal,’ the duty sergeant told him. ‘But to be honest with you, it didn’t make a lot of sense.’

‘I’m not surprised. She was probably in a panic. What was it?’

‘She said that before she went missing, this teacher had been looking for legs on the ceiling.’

‘She was looking for *what*?’

‘I know. I asked her to repeat it, but she said the same thing again. The children in her class said they’d been frightened by legs on the ceiling and so she’d gone back to the classroom to find out what they meant. That was the last they saw of her before they found her body.’

Herbert Chance frowned, and then he turned to Jamila. ‘I could be barking up the wrong tree altogether, DS Patel, but this sounds as if it might possibly have some connection to what we’ve been discussing here this morning. Perhaps you and DC Pardoe can go along with Simon and interview the witnesses. I mean – missing feet and missing heads and half a body and now we’ve got legs on the ceiling?’

He shook his head and made a blurring sound with his lips. ‘Jesus.’

*

Jamila and Jerry stood well back by the goalposts as the five-strong forensic team waddled around Mary's body in their noisy white Tyvek suits, like a solemn gathering of snowmen.

The investigators took hundreds of pictures, as well as samples from the grass all around her. Then they put up a blue vinyl tent – not only to shield her body from the rain, which was starting to fall more heavily again, but also to hide her from the long-distance lenses of the news photographers who were clustered behind the school gates.

Derek Grant lifted the flap of the tent and came over to where Jamila and Jerry were standing. Simon Fairbrother had gone back inside the school with DS Lang and DC Williams so that they could interview Sheila Daventry and other members of staff. Jamila and Jerry were also anxious to talk to the children of Year Two about the 'legs', but first they would need their parents' permission. They would also have to wait for the arrival of a child psychologist from the Schools and Community Psychology Service.

'Very, very nasty one, this,' said the Martian, pulling down his face mask. 'It looks as if she was run over by some kind of vehicle, although I'm not so sure it was a train. And then of course she was doused in some inflammable liquid and set alight.'

'If it wasn't a train, what was it?' asked Jerry.

'I can't say yet. Not for certain. We'll have to do some gauge comparisons and analyse the impressions that the wheels have made in her body, but I'd estimate that it weighed several tons, whatever it was.'

'But it didn't happen here, on this playing field,' said Jamila. 'There are no wheel marks anywhere. She must have been run over somewhere else and then brought here.'

'That's correct. But where she was taken and what exactly it was that ran her over, it's too early to tell. There's a railway line on the other side of Wandsworth Common, but I can't believe that her assailant threw her in front of a train and then

carried her body back here without somebody noticing. Not least the train driver.'

'In any case, how would they have got access to the track?' said Jerry. 'And there's the time frame too. The head teacher said that she was missing for not much more than half an hour.'

'Perhaps it wasn't a vehicle at all,' Jamila suggested. 'Perhaps it was some kind of machinery. You know, like a printing press or a bottling machine. I remember my friend's father was killed in a soft drink factory in Karachi. He was cleaning up broken glass underneath the production line when they started it up, not realising that he was down there.'

'Well, we'll find out,' said the Martian. 'We'll also be able to analyse exactly what kind of inflammable liquid was used to set her alight. We've dug up some unburned samples that were soaked into the turf all around her. I have to say that it doesn't smell like petrol.'

Jerry thought for a while. He couldn't stop visualising Mary's shattered and crushed and half-cremated body.

'Hazard a guess,' he said to the Martian. 'How do you think this was done?'

The Martian shrugged. 'I don't have the first idea. I really don't. Not unless she was picked up by a drone and carried away somewhere to be mangled, and then flown back here and dropped onto this playing field.'

'And that's about as likely as Millwall winning this year's FA Cup,' said Jerry.

'Well, precisely. Even that Sherlock Holmes thing doesn't work, not in this case. You know, "when you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth". Everything about this case is impossible. Everything. It couldn't have happened. The only trouble is that it did.'

*

DS Lang came walking towards them, but stopped halfway across the playing field.

‘Jerry?’ he called out. ‘Two of the kids’ parents have turned up. And the shrink from the SCPS. And she’s quite a looker too.’

‘Thanks, Sarge!’ Jerry called back. ‘Maybe we can find out now what these mysterious legs were all about. Derek – we’ll look forward to hearing from you later.’

‘Oh – before you go,’ said the Martian. ‘I was right on the verge of emailing you when we got the shout to come out here. That cigarette butt you found at Bennerley Road, I gave it to Geoff Baxter as soon as we got back to the lab. He took one sniff and identified it *snap!* just like that.’

‘Well, I’ve never smelled anything like it. What was it?’

‘It was a vintage cigarette called Spanish Shawl. During the war, it was often the only cigarette you could get. It was made by J. W. Weiner Limited down in Portsmouth – Spanish Shawl Oriental Amber. I think they perfumed it to cover up how crap the tobacco was. Geoff said that some cinemas in wartime wouldn’t let you smoke them inside because they stunk so much.’

‘When you say “vintage cigarette”, can you still buy them today?’ asked Jamila.

‘Only if you’re a collector. They haven’t been produced since the end of the war.’

‘So what was somebody doing in the Hartley household in which nobody smoked, smoking a cigarette that was more than seventy-five years out of date? And why would anybody want to be smoking a cigarette that old, anyway?’

‘I’m afraid that’s up to you to find out,’ said the Martian. ‘But we’re still completing the DNA results, so we may be able to help you a little more later.’

Jamila turned to Jerry and said, ‘Come on, Jerry. Let’s go and talk to those children. Children always make good witnesses. They see things as they are, not as they believe they ought to be.’

7

Because of the discovery of Mary's body, the whole of Brookwood School had been closed for the rest of the day, and parents were already beginning to arrive to collect their children.

The parents of five children from Year Two had agreed that they could talk to the police, and both parents and children were waiting in Sheila Daventry's office. The children were sitting in a circle around a young woman with tangled blonde hair and the tightest navy-blue sweater that Jerry had ever seen. She stood up when Jamila and Jerry entered the office and held out her hand.

'Karolina Mogielska,' she introduced herself, with a slight Polish accent. 'I am from the child psychology service.'

'My name's Detective Sergeant Jamila Patel and this is Detective Constable Jerry Pardoe,' said Jamila, and then she turned to the children and smiled. 'Thank you so much for staying behind to talk to us. We'll try to make this as quick as we can. But it is very important that we find out what exactly happened today.'

Jerry dragged over two chairs so that he and Jamila could sit down facing the children. All of them looked pale and worried and one little girl was nervously chewing her lips.

'Ms Daventry told us that you saw something strange,' said Jamila. 'It frightened you, whatever it was, and that was why you all left your classroom. Can you describe it for me?'

'It was *legs*,' said one little girl.

'What's your name, sweetheart?' Jamila asked her.

'Naomi.'

‘And where were these legs, Naomi?’

‘They was up on the ceiling,’ a boy immediately put in. ‘The ceiling got all crackly and then the legs came down. They walked across the ceiling and then they went into the wall.’

‘And you are?’

‘Michael Solomon.’

‘Okay, Michael,’ said Jerry, leaning forward. ‘Can you tell us what these legs looked like? How far up did they go? Like, up to the knees, or further up than that?’

‘Up to the knees. And they had grey trousers on, and brown shoes. Brown shoes like my grandad’s. Not shiny but rough.’

‘That sounds like suede.’

The little girl who had been chewing her lips said, very emphatically, ‘They were lace-ups.’

‘Did they make any noise, these legs, when they walked across the ceiling?’

Naomi shook her head. ‘I didn’t hear them making any noise, but then some of my friends were screaming.’

‘And you say they disappeared into the wall? On which side of the classroom was that?’

‘Next to the door.’

A freckle-faced boy who had been silent so far put up his hand as if he were answering a question in class. ‘He dropped a fag.’

‘A fag? You mean a cigarette? Who did?’

‘The man the legs belonged to. It dropped down from the ceiling. It fell down next to my table.’

‘A cigarette? You’re sure about that?’

‘It still had smoke coming out of it.’

‘Did any of the rest of you see it?’

The other four children softly chorused, ‘No.’

‘Do you have any more questions?’ asked Karolina. ‘I think it would be better for the children if they could go home now.’

‘Only two more questions,’ said Jamila. ‘And I am asking this of all of you. What do you think those legs actually were? And whose legs do you think they might have been?’

‘A ghost,’ declared Naomi. ‘It must have been a ghost.’

All the other children nodded.

‘I think it was somebody who lived there before it was a school,’ said Michael.

From the back of her office, Sheila Daventry said, ‘It’s always been a school, Michael. It was built in 1951, on a bomb site. I don’t know what was here before.’

Jamila and Jerry stood up. ‘All right. Thank you all for your help.’

They left the office, but Karolina came out to join them in the corridor.

‘What do you think they saw?’ asked Jamila.

‘I am not sure,’ Karolina told them. ‘I have known children who have suffered from delusions before. Usually children who have been traumatised by violence at home, or who have witnessed a serious accident. Sometimes children can be deeply frightened by a film that they have seen or a story they have read, and they can imagine all sorts of monsters or weird things happening. Only last week I treated a seven-year-old girl who was convinced she could see a woman staring into her bedroom window at night, even though her bedroom was in a flat that was five floors up.’

‘But this wasn’t just one child,’ said Jamila. ‘This was *fifteen* children, and they all saw the same thing.’

‘I know. I have never come across anything like it before, not ever. It might have been mass hysteria, but how and why all fifteen of them should have seen legs walking across the ceiling – I can’t explain it. But I will look into it further, and try to find any similar case histories.’

‘Meanwhile, let’s go and see if that fag end was real, and if it’s still there,’ said Jerry.

They made their way along the corridor to the Year Two classroom. Just before they went in, Jamila’s colleagues at Ilford police station called her about a new incident of religious vandalism in Redbridge, so she waited by the door. Jerry circled around the classroom, ducking down to look under the tables.

Sure enough, next to a drawing book with a picture of an odd-looking horse in it, he found a half-smoked untipped cigarette end.

He was tempted to pick it up and sniff it, but he left it where it was, so that the forensic investigators could photograph it first, and then he went outside to tell the Martian about it. Jamila followed him, still talking worriedly on the phone.

‘They painted a message on the gurdwara wall? In Pashto? “Hell is waiting for you?”’

*

As he was telling the Martian about the cigarette butt, Jerry forced himself to look over his shoulder at Mary Jonas’s body. From where he was standing by the tent flap, he could see the two deep parallel grooves in her chest and her thighs where she had been run over. Molly Something was kneeling beside her now, taking pictures that the forensic team would presumably use to recreate the type of wheels that had crushed her.

Gordon Bennett, he thought. I’m going to have some right screaming nightmares about this tonight.

It was not only the devastating damage that had been done to her that he found so disturbing, it was the total mystery of how she could have been brought here in this condition, before she was set alight. He also had to ask himself if her murder was connected in any way with the legs that her class had seen on the ceiling. She had been going to investigate them when she disappeared, after all. But if there was a connection, what in the name of God could it be?

‘Do you want to take a last shufti?’ he asked Jamila, nodding towards the raised tent flap.

Jamila shook her head. ‘I think I have a clear enough picture in my mind, thank you, Jerry. Let’s go back and see how DI Fairbrother is getting on.’

They returned to the school building to find Simon Fairbrother and the other detectives in the staff room, where they had been interviewing all the teachers, as well as Bryan the caretaker. Mary’s husband, Samuel, had arrived, and was sitting in one of the armchairs silently weeping, with a handkerchief clutched in one hand. Sheila Daventry was sitting beside him, holding his other hand and trying to console him.

‘This is the victim’s husband,’ said Simon Fairbrother. ‘I don’t know if he’s got all that much to tell us, but he says that he and his wife had been the butt of some racist aggression lately.’

Jamila and Jerry went over to Samuel Jonas and introduced themselves. Samuel Jonas looked up at them miserably, his eyes reddened and filled with tears. He was wearing a white durag to cover his hair, and a gold cross earring dangled from his left earlobe. He was still dressed in his chef’s whites, with ‘Turtle Bay’ embroidered on the front pocket.

‘We’re so sorry about your Mary,’ said Jamila, reaching out and touching his shoulder. ‘It must have been such a terrible shock. Do you have any family that we can contact for you?’

‘But how did she die?’ Samuel Jonas asked her, his voice croaking with grief. ‘They have only told me that she was found on the playing field outside and that somebody had assaulted her. They said that they didn’t know who it was yet, or why they might have picked on her.’

‘Well, I’m afraid that’s right and we don’t know, no. But our investigation has only just started, Samuel, and we *will* find out, I promise you. And you’ll be the first to know the answer.’

‘They wouldn’t even tell me *how* she died. All they said was she was lying on the playing field and there was no sign of life.’

‘Our forensic investigators are examining her right now. Then she’ll be taken to Wandsworth Medical Centre so that the coroner can carry out a full post-mortem.’

‘Yes, but how was she killed? Whoever it was who attacked her, what did they do to her? Can I see her? She’s my wife! Why can’t I see her?’

‘Sorry, mate,’ said Jerry. ‘When we have a crime scene, nobody’s allowed near it except the forensics and us. We have to make sure that none of the evidence gets mucked up, do you know what I mean?’

‘But can’t you give me some idea?’ Samuel sobbed. ‘Was she strangled, or beaten, or stabbed, or what?’ He paused, and then he took a deep choking breath. ‘Don’t tell me she was raped.’

‘I’ll be honest with you, we don’t really know yet.’

‘I say that, about rape, because we have had some bad trouble lately in the street where we live, in Brixton. We moved in only three months ago – our first house after living in a flat. But almost as soon as we had moved in, we started getting abuse from some of the neighbours.’

‘Such as?’

‘There’s a bunch of kids, maybe a dozen of them. I say kids but they are more like teenagers. They’ve been tipping all kinds of rubbish into our front garden, and throwing stones at our sitting-room window. Every week they knock over our dustbin, and they’ve been scratching my car. If we leave the house when they are outside, they shout out all kinds of racist language. You know – the N word and worse.’

‘You don’t think these kids could have had anything to do with your Mary being assaulted, do you?’

‘Maybe not the kids. But sometimes two or three of their dads are out there too. Whenever Mary comes out and walks along the street on the way to the station, these men whistle

and shout out things like they would want to have her, if only their wives couldn't find out, because afterwards they would have to wash the black off their private parts.'

He dabbed at his eyes with his handkerchief. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be offensive. But of course the words they use are much more offensive than that.'

'Thank you, Samuel,' said Jamila. 'It doesn't sound very likely that any of these men were involved in Mary's death, but we'll go and talk to them just the same.'

'I have some videos I took of them with my phone, so you will be able to see who they are.'

'Excellent. Meanwhile, a specialist officer will be in touch with you to help you with everything you need to know about Mary's death, and to give you counselling if you need it. I can only tell you again how sorry we are, and that you have our deepest condolences.'

Samuel nodded, his eyes welling up again with tears, so that he could hardly see. 'Thank you. But I don't want condolences. All I want is Mary.'

*

As they were walking across the school car park, they heard the Martian shouting out, 'Jerry!'

Jerry stopped and turned around to see the Martian waddling towards him in his white Tyvek suit.

'Jerry – I thought the sooner you knew about this the better.'

He was holding up a small plastic evidence bag.

'That cigarette butt you found in the classroom, it's been smoked down too far to see the brand name on it. But I smelled it, and if my sense of smell is half as keen as Geoff Baxter's, I'd say it was a Spanish Shawl.'

'Don't tell me it was dropped by the same perp that sliced up that poor Kathleen Hartley. I mean, what kind of sadistic maniac are we looking for?'

‘I hate to say it, Jerry, but a very creative one, when it comes to killing people.’

8

They were bored with playing *Kirby and the Forgotten Land*, so Adele and Archie were kicking a football around their small front garden in Northcote Road. They had drawn a chalk goal on the brick wall under the living-room window, and Adele was playing goalie.

Archie's hero was Cristiano Ronaldo, and he prided himself as a striker, but so far Adele had saved every shot. She was eleven, though, two years older than Archie, and she had long legs and long arms and she had come top in athletics at school.

Increasingly frustrated, Archie gave the ball the hardest kick that he could, almost falling over as he swung his leg. The ball bounced off the living-room window with a loud bang and then over the privet hedge and onto the pavement. Archie immediately unlatched the front gate and went out after it, trying to catch it before it could bounce out onto the road.

An elderly woman was coming up the street, carrying two large shopping bags. The ball rolled towards her, and so she stuck out one foot and stopped it.

'Here, thanks,' said Archie, scooping it up. 'You should play for Arsenal, you should.'

The woman gave him a tight little smile and set down her bags on the pavement. She was quite diminutive, with a worn brown overcoat and a felt hat that looked like a chocolate cake that had collapsed in the oven. The heels of her shoes were worn down almost to the soles.

'Do you know what time the next tram is?' she asked.

'The next what?'

‘Tram. The number 33. I only need to go one stop but these bags are too heavy for me to carry any further. And I don’t know what’s happened to the stop sign. It was here yesterday. What have they taken it down for?’

Adele came out of the front gate. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘This lady seems to think there’s going to be a tram coming.’

‘A tram? There’s no trams along here. Never has been.’

‘Oh, yes. The number 33. I was telling your friend here that I don’t need to go far but these bags weigh a ton.’

‘He’s my brother, not my friend. Where do you live?’

‘Seventy-nine Salcott Road.’

‘That’s only three streets away,’ said Adele. ‘Archie and me, we can carry your bags for you.’

‘Really, dear? That’s very sweet of you.’

‘Better than Archie smashing the sitting-room window.’

Archie dropped the football back into the front garden, and then he and Adele each picked up one of the woman’s shopping bags. They started to walk slowly northwards, waiting for the woman every now and then as she paused for breath and to press her hand against her back.

‘Sciatica,’ she said, although neither Adele nor Archie knew what she meant.

Adele’s bag was so heavy that she looked down to see what was in it. There was a large box of Oxydol detergent, with orange and blue circles on it, and a folded-up copy of a newspaper, the *News Chronicle*, as well as three tins of Prince’s ox tongue and tins of peas and tomatoes.

For some reason that she couldn’t understand, the sight of this shopping made Adele feel strangely uneasy. It reminded her of when she was younger, and she had stayed with her grandmother in Bognor Regis. The rooms had always been airless, and smelled of faded lavender and times gone by, and until her grandmother had been ready to take her down to the

beach, there had been nothing to do but sit and listen to the clock ticking in the hallway.

She looked over at Archie, but he was too busy singing ‘Young Thug’ to himself and swinging his shopping bag from one hand to the other.

They had reached Wakehurst Road when two of Adele’s friends from school came jogging towards them, Rosie and Ola. The two of them were laughing about something and playfully pushing each other. When they saw Adele, they waved wildly and called out, ‘Hi, Ad! Where are you off to?’

‘We’re carrying this old lady’s shopping bags for her. We won’t be long if you want to come around to mine after. She only lives in Salcott Road.’

Rosie and Ola crossed the street and stared at Adele with bemused expressions on their faces.

‘Erm... what old lady, Ad? What shopping bags?’

‘This old lady here,’ said Adele. ‘And these shopping bags.’ She held up her bag and shook it.

‘Is this a joke?’ asked Rosie.

‘Of course it’s not a joke. What are you talking about?’

‘I’m talking about this old lady you’re talking about and these shopping bags you’re talking about. Because I can’t see any old lady and I can’t see any shopping bags. Ola? Can you see an old lady? Can you see any shopping bags?’

Ola shook her head. ‘Are you having a laugh, Ad? Because I don’t exactly see what’s funny.’

‘Can we be getting on, dear?’ the woman put in. ‘By the look of those clouds, it’s going to be pouring down soon.’

‘Yes, all right,’ said Adele. ‘Listen, Rosie, come round after if you want to.’

‘I’m not sure I do if this is what you’re going to be like. Are you taking us for mugs, or what?’

‘Please, let’s be going,’ the woman insisted.

Adele and Archie left the two girls staring at them and carried on to Salcott Road, yet another long street of semi-detached Victorian houses. Number 79 was shabbier than its neighbour, almost hidden behind an overgrown laurel hedge. A battered metal dustbin stood like an abandoned Dalek in a front garden that was crowded with dandelions and groundsel. The drainpipes were rusty and the window frames were blistered and peeling and badly in need of repainting.

Adele was puzzled to notice that all the windows had brown parcel tape stuck across them in an X shape.

The woman unlocked the front door and went inside.

‘If you can just carry the shopping into the kitchen, that will be wonderful.’

Adele and Archie stepped into the hallway. It was gloomy because the only light came from a stained-glass window halfway up the stairs, and it smelled of boiled cabbage and floor polish. Five long overcoats were hanging from a row of hooks as if they were executed criminals hanging from a scaffold.

‘This way,’ said the woman, and she opened the kitchen door.

Adele and Archie lifted the shopping bags onto the kitchen table. The kitchen was almost as gloomy as the hallway, even though its windows looked out onto a narrow back garden. Adele had never seen a kitchen that was so old-fashioned. It had an upright gas cooker with a big black kettle on it, and a sink with a wooden draining board, but there was no refrigerator that she could see, and no dishwasher. Not even a washing machine.

In the kitchen too, all the windows had brown taped Xs stuck across them.

The woman took off her chocolate-cake hat and set it down on the table.

‘Thank you *so* much for carrying my bags. I would still be out there waiting for the tram, wouldn’t I, and look – it’s started to rain already. Here – you can’t go unrewarded.’

She opened up her worn brown leather handbag, took out her purse, and handed a coin to each of them. Adele thought at first that her coin was a 10p, but when she looked at it more closely she realised that it had the head of an unfamiliar man on it, instead of King Charles. She had never seen a coin like it.

Archie looked at his coin too, and it was the same. He glanced over at Adele but she shook her head as if to tell him that they shouldn't say anything. Perhaps they were foreign coins, and the woman didn't realise. They might still be worth something.

'Have a pleasant day, then, dearies,' said the woman, as they went back along the gloomy hallway and opened the front door. It had grown even darker outside as the grey clouds rolled over, and the first spots of rain were falling on the garden path. 'You'd better get your skates on, hadn't you? You don't want to get a soaking!'

They hurried out onto the pavement and ran to the corner with Northcote Road. But as they started to run back towards their house, they heard a clanging sound, and then a whining, grinding noise. To their astonishment, they saw a red tram approaching. A narrow double-decker tram, with poles on its roof that connected it to overhead wires. It had a number on the front – 33.

Adele and Archie stopped running and stood watching the tram in disbelief as it passed by. It was crowded inside, so that some of the passengers were standing up. Adele noticed that almost all of them were wearing hats or caps.

'I don't get it,' said Archie. 'That was the tram the old woman was waiting for. But there *aren't* any trams.'

Adele was still staring at the tram as it stopped three streets further up the road. Several people were waiting for it, and when five or six passengers had disembarked, they all climbed on. The tram started off again, and eventually it disappeared around the bend. They heard it clanging again in the distance, as it reached Battersea Rise.

‘You’re right, Arch,’ she said, and she spoke in little more than a haunted whisper. ‘There *aren’t* any trams. But that’s a tram. And look – there’s rails in the middle of the road for it to run on. And wires.’

‘They couldn’t have laid all those rails down and put up those wires in five minutes. We weren’t in that old woman’s house any longer than that, were we? They just couldn’t have done.’

‘I’ve got a horrible, horrible feeling about this,’ said Adele. ‘Let’s get home.’

It was starting to rain harder, so they ran. When they arrived at their house, though, they both skidded to a stop in utter shock. There was no house there, only a chaotic heap of bricks and rubble, with a single chimney stack where the living-room fireplace had been. The house next door was still standing, although its windows were all boarded up with plywood and its front garden was scattered with broken masonry.

Adele was breathless with panic and her heart was beating hard. She felt as if she were having a bad dream, and that she would soon wake up.

‘What’s happened to our house?’ asked Archie. He was just as bewildered as she was, and close to tears. ‘Where’s Mum and Dad?’

It was then that a short man in a tweed overcoat came bustling round the corner, his collar turned up against the rain, smoking a cigarette. He started to dodge past them, but Adele said, ‘Excuse me, excuse me – do you know what’s happened to this house?’

The man stopped and blinked at her as if she were having him on.

‘Three guesses, darling.’

‘No, seriously. What’s happened to it?’

‘It was bombed, what do you think? That raid three nights ago.’

‘I don’t understand. This is our house and it was all right twenty minutes ago.’

‘You must have the wrong house, darling.’

‘But it *is* our house. Or it *was* our house. Where are the people who live here? Our dad and our mum?’

The man took the cigarette out of his mouth and blew a stream of smoke.

‘It was the Marshalls. They lived here. Mr and Mrs Marshall and their daughter Liz. They all got it, I’m sorry to tell you. Nice family too. Mr Marshall worked for the London County Council so far as I remember.’

‘But this was *our* house,’ Archie protested. ‘I’ve never heard of Mr and Mrs Marshall. And what do you mean, they “got it”?’

‘Killed, son. Didn’t stand a chance. The only thing that got out alive from that house was their cat.’

Adele started to cry. She pressed her hand over her mouth and stood in the rain with her shoulders shaking in bewilderment and grief.

The man said, ‘I’m really sorry, darling, but I don’t know what I can do to help you. Maybe you should call the coppers and ask them what’s going on.’

Archie tugged at Adele’s sleeve. ‘Let’s go back to that old woman’s house. That’s where it all started to go peculiar. Perhaps if we go in again and then out again, it’ll all be like it was before.’

Adele nodded and wiped her eyes with her fingers. The man called out, ‘Sorry, darling,’ yet again as the two of them ran back up to Salcott Road.

Once they reached the old woman’s front door, they pressed the bell. They couldn’t hear it ringing inside the house and she didn’t come to answer it. They pressed it again and again, but she still didn’t answer, and so they knocked. After a long wait, the door opened and there she was, with a half-eaten currant bun in her hand.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said. ‘I thought you’d gone back home.’

‘We did, but everything’s gone strange and our house has been bombed. We don’t know what’s happened to our mum and dad.’

‘What do you mean, “everything’s gone strange”? Don’t you know there’s a war on?’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Adele. ‘There isn’t a war on. At least, there wasn’t. And there aren’t any trams, but now there are. We don’t know what’s happened to us.’

The woman looked at Adele and Archie thoughtfully, still chewing. Then she said, ‘I think you’d better come in. What you need is a word with Old Scratch.’

‘Who?’

‘Old Scratch. If anybody has any idea what to do, he will. I’ll give him a ring and ask him if he can see you.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Come along inside. He’s the one who can make every dream you never had come true.’

*

Adele and Archie followed the woman into her kitchen, and the woman poured Adele a glass of water. Then she went into her living room and they could hear the distinctive sound of a dial telephone.

‘Hallo?’ she said, but then she closed the living-room door so that they couldn’t hear the rest of the conversation. After two or three minutes, though, she came back into the kitchen and said, ‘It’s all right. He can see you. But he said that he couldn’t make any promises.’

‘Promises about what?’ asked Adele. ‘What did he mean?’

‘You’ll see when you talk to him. Here – I’ll write down his address for you. It’s not all that far on the tram. Nine, St Oswald’s Place, in Kennington. It’s at the back of the church, but it’s not part of it.’

‘But we’ve never been on a tram,’ Archie protested. ‘And we haven’t got any money for the fare.’

‘I gave you a shilling each, that’ll be more than enough. It’s twopence to Kennington from here but it’ll only be a penny each for you two, children’s fare. And you can borrow my umbrella so you don’t get soaked and catch your death.’

‘What’s he like, this Old Scratch?’ Adele asked her. ‘I mean, is that his real name? What are we supposed to call him?’

‘Oh, he has more names than you can shake a stick at. But Scratch will do.’

‘I’m frightened,’ said Adele.

‘Well, we all are, darling, just at the moment. But you know what the song says. “Just forget your troubles... tomorrow is a lovely day.”’

9

When Jamila and Jerry arrived at the Metropolitan Police forensic laboratory in Lambeth Road, they found the Martian waiting for them upstairs in Block B. Molly Something was there too, peering at a sample of something through a microscope, but she didn't look up when they came in.

Fancy her getting married to a bloke called Hugo, thought Jerry. And I'll bet they have two kids called Christopher and Fiona.

'We've come up with a fair few answers,' said the Martian, pulling two stools across so that Jamila and Jerry could sit down next to his bench. Jerry thought that without his bulky Tyvek suit, he looked less like a Martian and more like a local dentist. 'The trouble is, the answers seem to have raised even more questions than they've answered.'

'Well, there's a surprise,' said Jerry.

Jamila said, 'What DC Pardoe and I are mainly interested in finding out is whether these three crimes genuinely share anything in common. If they do not, then there really is no reason for us to continue working on them together. They brought me down from Redbridge only because the witness statements all bore some unusual similarities.'

'I understand that,' the Martian nodded. 'I've heard of your reputation for investigating offbeat crimes together. And there's no question that these three cases are well outside the usual parameters of routine investigation. Personally, I wouldn't go so far as to say they were "supernatural", but in my book "inexplicable" would go a long way to describing them.'

He reached across the bench and picked up the evidence bag containing the grey woollen scarf that had been found in Kathleen Hartley's front garden.

'Take this scarf. As you know, its label comes from a department store that ceased trading after it was bombed during the war, but the odd thing is that it appears to be practically new. The forensic examination of clothing wear-and-tear is still a very niche business at the moment, but we were able to determine by the condition of the fabric that it is probably less than six months old.

'Although it's comparatively new, its owner is a heavy smoker. And both the DNA and the tobacco tar that we extracted from it are an exact match for that Spanish Shawl cigarette that you found in the same room as Kathleen Hartley's body.'

'And what about the cigarette end that I found in the classroom at Brookwood School? You thought that was a Spanish Shawl too?'

'I was right. It was. But the DNA we took from the saliva that was left on it was no match to the first cigarette. We're talking about two different smokers here.'

'One with no head and one who was nothing but legs. Great. That rules out posting any ID sketches on Twitter, doesn't it? "Have you seen these men?"'

'What about the shopkeeper – the one who was blinded?' asked Jamila.

'We found fingerprints on each side of the plastic screen that the perpetrator pulled away from the counter. Although the shopkeeper said he saw only half a man, we were able to lift both right and left fingerprints. And, as you know, fingerprints are a reliable source of DNA.

'On top of that, we were also able to lift a partial fingerprint from the shell casing that we found on the floor of the house in Bolingbroke Grove where Kenneth Treagus was shot. That too gave us a sample of DNA and from its Y chromosome – guess what?'

‘I have no idea. Tell me.’

The Martian looked almost triumphant, like a magician who has pulled two cats out of a hat. ‘We were able to establish that the DNA almost certainly belongs to a brother of the perpetrator who blinded the shopkeeper.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Jerry. ‘So the man with no feet is a brother of the man who is only half a man? Does this get any more complicated?’

‘Well, I’m afraid it does. Shell casings aren’t numbered. Several governments have carried out research into the possibility of doing it, but it would prove far too expensive and time-consuming. But in this case the shell casing was very distinctive because it was part of a consignment of .45 ACP ammunition that was stolen from London docks on 17 August 1942, in the middle of the war. It had been sent from the United States on lend-lease and every bullet was stamped F A 42 – F A showing that it had been manufactured by Frankford Arsenal.

‘According to the records, almost all that box of ammunition was recovered by the police two days later because some informant with a grudge tipped them off about it. But there’s no question that the round that killed Kenneth Treagus definitely came out of that stolen batch.’

Jerry said, ‘This is mental. Who carries a gun around with eighty-year-old bullets in it?’

‘Believe me, it gets even more baffling. We haven’t yet completed our autopsy of Mary Jonas, not by a long way, but there are two things we do know already. The first is that she was burned not with petrol but with aviation fuel.’

‘What?’

‘Oh, yes. It’s possible to distinguish between them because aviation fuel has different hydrocarbons and special additives to stop it from freezing at high altitudes and suchlike.

‘The second thing is that she was run over by a wheeled vehicle that must have weighed as much as fifty tons. That wheeled vehicle ran on tracks with a gauge of exactly four feet

seven-and-three-quarter inches. That's just over one metre and forty-one centimetres.'

'So what kind of vehicle was it?' asked Jamila. 'Can you tell?'

'There was only one type of vehicle it could have been, DS Patel. A tram. And not a modern tram either, because the standard track they run on today is an inch or two-and-a-half centimetres wider.'

Jamila blinked at him, utterly perplexed. 'But there are no tramlines anywhere in the vicinity of that school, old or modern. And there was no way that a fifty-ton tram ran across that playing field. There are trams running through the centre of Croydon, aren't there? But Croydon must be more than half an hour away, and Mary Jonas wasn't missing for long enough for her to be taken there. And even if she was, how could she have been run over and then her body brought back to the school?'

'That's what I mean by inexplicable,' said the Martian.

*

After they had returned to Lavender Hill, Jamila and Jerry went into the canteen for a cup of coffee and a long think about what Derek Grant had told them.

'This is really doing my head in,' said Jerry. 'They're all linked together, those three incidents, but the way they're linked together makes no sense at all. I mean, what were the motives? Okay – the perp who poked out that poor bloody shopkeeper's eyes, he was on the rob, and his brother might have been burgling the Treagus house when he was disturbed, and that's why he shot Kenneth Treagus.'

'But why was Kathleen Hartley sliced up like that? And why was Mary Jonas squashed by a tram and set on fire? The perps who did them in were both smoking the same brand of out-of-date fags, but did they actually know each other, and where did they get those fags from anyway?'

Jamila had been prodding at her phone. 'All I can find for Spanish Shawl cigarettes is empty packets for sale to

collectors on eBay starting at £29 each. Or there's one box that used to contain twenty-four cigarettes but has only thirteen left – and they come with a caution that they are definitely not for smoking.'

Jerry tore open three packets of sugar and stirred them into his coffee. 'Jesus. As if the forensics weren't bonkers enough, there's all these witness statements about people with missing bits. Do you think they're connected, or is it just coincidence? Or maybe all the witnesses had been sniffing the same brand of glue? It's not as if the same bit was missing in each case, is it? Heads, bodies and legs. Jesus.'

'I still can't help thinking about the jinns,' said Jamila. 'These cases have so much similarity to the stories that are told in Pakistan. And did you see that report that was on the news this weekend? It said that some scientists in Antarctica have discovered particles rising from the ice that prove there is a parallel universe next to ours.'

Jerry puffed out his cheeks. 'I don't know. As if *this* bloody universe wasn't bad enough.'

He drained his cup of coffee and was thinking about a second cup when Simon Fairbrother came into the canteen, looking right and left to see where they were.

'Ah, Jerry – DS Patel – thought I might find you in here!'

He came and sat down beside them. 'I'm not at all sure if this is one for you, but I thought there's an outside chance that it might be. Four hours ago we had a misper report, two kids missing by Wandsworth Common.'

'Oh, yes? And what exactly are we supposed to do about it? Can't you get the dogs out?'

'Well, we will, of course. But I've just heard the first witness statements. I could be way off the mark, I admit – but it sounds to me as if there's an outside chance that their disappearance might have some connection with all these weird cases that *you've* been assigned to look into.'

'Don't tell me. Somebody saw them being abducted by a man with no arms on a horse with no legs.'

Simon Fairbrother ignored that remark. ‘They’re a sister and a brother, ages eleven and nine. Adele and Archie Cooper. They were walking up Northcote Road when they were met by two of the sister’s school friends. The friends asked them where they were going and they insisted that they were carrying shopping bags for an elderly female.’

‘And?’

‘And the thing about it is, that they weren’t. There were no shopping bags and there was no elderly female. But that was the last that anybody saw of them. They were supposed to come in for their lunch, but when their mother went to call them, they were gone.’

‘They didn’t have a phone between them?’

‘No. The girl has a phone but she’d left it indoors. The last their mother had seen of them, they were kicking a football around in their front garden.’

‘Maybe they were just joking about an elderly woman. You know what kids are like. They have invisible friends, don’t they, some of them? A pal of mine at school had an invisible dog called Boot.’

‘I would have agreed with you, Jerry, if these kids hadn’t gone missing, and if we hadn’t had these three cases where the suspects could only be partially seen.’

‘All right,’ said Jamila. ‘For the sake of being thorough, we will talk to the sister’s friends. Are they here at the station?’

‘No, they’ve gone back home, but I can give you their phone numbers and their addresses.’

‘Oh well,’ said Jerry. ‘Just as well I haven’t got time for a second cup of coffee. It only would have given me the shakes.’

*

They drove down to Honeywell Road, where Rosie lived. Ola was there too, and they were sitting in the living room playing *Unravel Two* on Rosie’s Xbox.

While Rosie’s mother hovered protectively in the living-room doorway, the two girls could only repeat what they had

told the officers who had interviewed them earlier. Adele had insisted that she and Archie were carrying some old woman's shopping for her.

'Do you think she was pranking you?' asked Jamila.

'She must've been! Because there was nobody there and she wasn't carrying anything. It kind of *looked* as if she was carrying something, didn't it, Ola? She had one hand right down by her side, and when she lifted it up to show me this pretend shopping bag that wasn't there, she lifted it up like this – like she was actually holding up something really heavy.'

'But then she and Archie just walked off?'

'Yes. We went to call on Adele later to see if she could come round here to mine, but her mum said she hadn't come back, and that's when we called the police.'

'I think – I think they might have gone up Salcott Road,' said Ola.

'Salcott Road?' Jerry asked her. 'That's only about two streets further up from where you met them, isn't it? Did you actually see them go up there?'

'No. But I looked back just the once and they were gone, so they might have done.'

'Did you tell the officers this, the ones who came to talk to you?'

'No. This is the first time I've thought about it. They definitely got as far as Salcott Road but I didn't see them after that.'

Jamila looked from one girl to the other. Both looked completely serious.

'You're absolutely one hundred per cent sure that there was nobody with them, either an old lady or anybody else?'

Both girls furiously shook their heads.

'Come on, then, Jerry,' said Jamila. 'Let us take a look along Salcott Road.'

*

‘To be honest with you, I don’t know what we’re supposed to be looking for here,’ said Jerry.

‘Well, neither do I, Jerry, but I had a strange feeling that we might find something, that’s all.’

‘All right. I’m willing to go along with that. I freely admit that ninety per cent of your strange feelings have turned out to be incredibly accurate.’

They were standing on the corner of Salcott Road. The only people in sight in this long street of terraced and semi-detached Victorian houses were two workmen shovelling broken bricks into a skip and a man walking towards them with a bedraggled white Sealyham terrier on a lead.

‘Maybe we should try knocking on some doors,’ Jerry suggested. ‘Somebody might have seen those two kids. And – look – those first two houses both have doorbell videos. There’s a chance that they might have picked them up.’

The man who was walking the Sealyham was approaching them now. He was wearing a trilby hat and a tightly belted trench coat, so that he reminded Jerry of a private eye out of an old Robert Mitchum film.

‘Sir!’ said Jamila, holding up her ID wallet.

The man came nearer and peered at her ID short-sightedly. ‘Oh! You’re police! I’m not speeding, am I?’

‘I just want to ask you if you happen to have seen two children walking up this road at any time this morning? A girl of eleven and a boy of nine?’

The man stopped and tugged at his Sealyham’s lead. For some reason, Jerry found it difficult to focus on his face. It seemed to be blurry, as if he were looking at them through a misted-up window.

‘I did see two children like that, yes, as a matter of fact,’ the man told them. ‘Round about when was it – elevenish? That was when I was taking Gracie for her morning constitutional.’

‘You *did* see them? Where? Were they alone, or did they have somebody with them?’

‘They had Mrs Chibnall with them. They were carrying her shopping, by the look of it.’

‘You saw them carrying a woman’s shopping bags? Is Mrs Chibnall an elderly lady?’

‘Oh, yes. In her seventies, easy. She’s a widow. Grumpy old so-and-so, her old man was. Better off without him, if you ask me.’

‘But you saw these two children carrying her shopping bags for her?’

‘Yes. Why? They didn’t run off with them, did they? Can’t trust children, especially these days!’

‘No, nothing like that,’ said Jerry. ‘Do you know where she lives, this Mrs Chibnall?’

‘Of course. Yes. It’s just up there, on this side of the road. You see that first telegraph pole? By there. Number 79.’

‘That’s really helpful, sir, thank you,’ said Jamila. ‘Do you think you could kindly wait for a couple of minutes while we go and check to see if the children are still there? If they are not, we may need to ask you for a few more details.’

‘Okay. All right if I just nip down to the newsagent and buy myself a packet of gaspers? I’m dying for a smoke.’

‘Of course.’

The man said, ‘Come on, Gracie, get those legs moving,’ and tugged at his Sealyham’s lead again.

Jamila and Jerry walked up to the telegraph pole. It stood next to a neatly trimmed privet hedge, but there was no house there. When Jerry looked over the hedge, all he could see was a patio paved with York stone and a collection of earthenware flowerpots. At the far end of the patio stood a child’s climbing frame with a sagging swing.

He walked back to check the number of the house next to this patio, and it was 75. Then he walked further up the road, to the next house, and that was 81.

‘There *is* no 79. No 77 either. Well, there must have been once, two semi-detached houses, but they’re not here now.’

‘So our dog-walking friend made a mistake about this Mrs Chibnall’s address,’ said Jamila.

Jerry went up to the front door of number 81 and rang the bell, but nobody answered. Then he went to number 75 and knocked. A young woman answered with a miserably crying baby on her hip.

‘Sorry to disturb you,’ said Jerry, showing his card. ‘Do you know a Mrs Chibnall? Elderly lady. Lives by herself, apparently. We were told we could find her at number 79, but as you probably know there is no number 79.’

The young woman said, ‘Mrs Chibnall? *Nie. Ona tu nie mieszka.*’

‘Pardon me?’

‘She – not – live – this – house.’

‘But you don’t know where she does live?’

‘*Nie rozumiem. Jestem opiekunka.*’

‘I don’t know much Polish,’ said Jamila. ‘But I think *nie rozumiem* means she doesn’t understand, and I guess that *opiekunka* means babysitter.’

The young woman nodded. ‘Babysitter, *tak.*’

‘Great,’ said Jerry. ‘Perhaps need to have another word with our dog-walking pal.’

There was no sign of the man with the Sealyham further down the street, so Jamila and Jerry walked back down to Northcote Road. The corner shop was not a newsagent’s after all, but a sandwich shop called Tasty Treats, and there was nobody in it except for a middle-aged Indian man in a purple turban talking to the woman behind the counter.

‘Haven’t seen a bloke with a small white dog, have you, love?’ asked Jerry.

The woman behind the counter slowly shook her head from side to side, as if she were denying guilt in a magistrates’

court.

When Jamila and Jerry stepped outside again and looked up and down Northcote Road, it was clear that the man and his dog had gone.

‘Shit,’ said Jerry. ‘This is getting weirder by the minute. There isn’t even a fag shop in sight. It’s all bloody estate agents and launderettes.’

‘It’s what he said about her address that disturbs me,’ said Jamila. ‘Why would he tell us that this Mrs Chibnall lived at number 79 when there *is* no number 79? What would be the point? If he meant it as a joke, it was not at all funny.’

‘Maybe the house doesn’t exist and maybe the bloke and his dog don’t exist either. Maybe we both fell asleep in the canteen and this is nothing but a dream.’

10

Sabina's mother had been screaming at her again, and so she climbed up into the attic and pulled the steps up after her.

She always retreated to the attic when her mother became angry, and it had been happening more and more frequently now that her father had formally applied for a divorce. Her mother couldn't scream at her father's secretary, Mia, with whom he had been living for the past three months, and so she took out her resentment and her sense of worthlessness on Sabina.

This evening, Sabina had dropped a plate in the kitchen sink and broken it, and that had been enough to start off a hysterical tirade about how clumsy she was and how stupid she was and how ungrateful she was for everything that her mother had done for her, and did she realise how much those Villeroy & Boch plates cost and how could she possibly afford to replace it now that her father had left her?

It was only half past six but it was already growing gloomy outside and it was starting to rain again. Sabina could hear the raindrops pattering on the tiles above her head. A single light bulb was dangling from a wire at one end of the attic, and it was under that light bulb that she had made herself a nest, with three cushions and a folded tartan rug.

She kept her favourite books there, *The Secret Garden* and *The Forgotten Horse*, and two packets of chocolate biscuits, and she could sit and watch films on her phone. She had watched *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* at least twenty times, and *The Lion King* almost as often.

She could call her friend Margot too, although Margot's parents were strict about her phone time and thought that

Sabina was a bad influence. She had no other friends at school. She wasn't bullied but she was ostracised because she had developed earlier than all her classmates and was taller and thought to be weird.

Her mother knew where she was, up in the attic, but never disturbed her and never called her to come back downstairs. She could only assume that her mother preferred to be without her. Her mother had told her recently that she had married her father only because she was pregnant with her, and that she hadn't wanted to have an abortion – 'although that would have solved everything, wouldn't it? And I could have been happy with somebody else.'

She sat down in her nest of cushions and tried to call Margot, but Margot didn't answer. She was probably having her supper. Sabina didn't know if she would be having any supper herself. Sometimes her mother would leave her something in the oven, keeping warm, like shepherd's pie or fish fingers. At other times she would have to make herself some toast or a Kraft cheese sandwich, while her mother sat in the living room with a bottle of Malbec, watching television.

The attic was stacked with boxes and chairs and standard lamps and framed oil paintings, all of which belonged to the owners of the house, the Atkinsons, who were currently living in Malta. Mr Atkinson was an accountant for Rathbone's, and they had rented the property to Sabina's parents on a five-year lease.

Each space between the rafters was like a shadowy grotto of its own. A small window at the far end of the attic let in a dim light from the street lamps outside. On certain nights, when she was up here late, Sabina could look through this window and see the various phases of the moon.

The whole attic was airless and musty, and Sabina had always thought that it smelled as if something had been burned in it, like burned hair.

She started to scroll through Twitter, but then she faintly heard music from the house next door, and she was sure she could hear a woman laughing. She was suddenly overwhelmed

by loneliness, and the sadness of her life, and she couldn't imagine that she would ever be happy.

Not only was she shunned by the girls in her class, but none of the boys had ever shown any interest in her either.

She started to sob. Deep, wrenching sobs that hurt her chest. Tears slid down her cheeks and dripped onto the screen of her phone.

'Here,' said a soft male voice. 'What's your problem, love?'

Sabina jolted in shock. She strained her eyes to see who had spoken, but the far end of the attic was too dark for her to see anything but rolled-up mats and boxes of books.

'*Who's there?*' she called out, so frightened that she was almost screaming.

'Who do you think?' the man replied. 'I'm stuck here, aren't I? Not exactly here by choice, I can tell you that.'

Sabina took several deep breaths. 'But who are you? And what are you doing up here? How did you get into the house?'

'What house?'

'This house. My mother always keeps the doors locked.'

'This isn't a house, love. It's a flat. Flat 12, Elsley Gardens.'

'This is number 37, Elsley Road. I've never heard of Elsley Gardens.'

'Well, at least you've stopped bawling. What was all that about?'

Sabina stood up. She waited until her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, but she still couldn't make out any man standing there.

'Where are you?' she said. 'Why don't you come out so that I can see you?'

'Because I can't bloody move without my wheelchair, can I?'

Sabina took a few steps forward. The central part of the attic was boarded over, but in each of the alcoves between the

rafters the floor was covered only in thick white loft insulation.

‘I still can’t see you,’ she said.

‘You’re getting warmer, love. Come on, just a tad further. That’s it. I can see *you* now. Can you see me?’

Sabina peered into the alcove on her right, and then into the alcove on her left. In the left-hand alcove, two folding garden chairs were stacked against the rafter, as well as a wooden clothes horse, but there was something lying on the white mineral wool that on first sight she took to be a football.

But then this football moved, and raised its face to her, and said, ‘There! Can you see me now?’ and she realised that it was a human head.

She had never been so terrified in the whole of her life – not even when her dressing gown had dropped off the back of her bedroom door in the middle of the night and she had been sure that it was crawling across the floor towards her.

Every nerve in her body was screeching at her to run back to the attic door, open it up, and climb down as quickly as she could. And yet she couldn’t move. She could only stand, quaking, and stare at this detached head in horror.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked the head. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost!’

Sabina opened her mouth but closed it again. She couldn’t find words. Even if she had been able to think what to say, the shock had emptied her lungs, and she couldn’t breathe, let alone speak.

‘Come on,’ the head coaxed her. ‘I’m not going to bite!’

At first, Sabina couldn’t see the head clearly in the darkness of the alcove, because her own shadow was falling across him. When she stepped back, though, she saw that he had prickly short-cropped hair and a pale, oval face with near-together eyes and a long, pointed nose. She didn’t really know why, but her first thought was that he looked under-nourished. Then she thought: he’s only a head. How can he possibly eat anything?

‘What’s your name, love?’ the head asked her. ‘My name’s Terry. But most people call me Tel.’

At last Sabina managed to speak. ‘I don’t understand,’ she told him. ‘How can you still be alive?’

‘What do you mean? I was badly wounded, yes. Dunkirk – shrapnel in the spine. I can’t fucking walk, excuse my French, but it didn’t kill me. Did you know me before? I don’t remember you.’

‘No, I’ve never seen you before. But what I mean is, how can you still be alive when your head’s been cut off?’

‘You what? My head’s still firmly attached to my body, thank you very much. It might not be a whole lot of use, my body. I can’t walk and I can’t please the ladies anymore. But I can still play the ukulele and I can still wipe my own arse, with the grace of God.’

Sabina knelt down on the floorboards and leaned forward so that she could see Terry more closely. She noticed that he had a mole on his right cheek, and that reminded her of her father, although her father’s mole was on his left cheek. Her father called it his ‘unbeauty spot’.

‘But where *is* your body?’ she asked Terry. ‘How can I only see your head? I didn’t see the rest of you hanging from the ceiling downstairs.’

‘I was about to ask you the same question, love. Well, not quite the same question, but nearly. How come you’re halfway up the wall? Like, how the hell did you get up there, and how come you’re not falling off?’

Sabina knelt up straight. ‘I think I’m going mad,’ she said.

‘No, you’re not. It’s because you’re upset about something. That can happen, when you’re upset about something. Shell shock, they call it. I saw it in France, love, believe me. One of my mates was sure that he was dead and gone to Heaven. A couple of them thought they was back home here in Blighty and that they wasn’t in France at all, but only having a nightmare.’

‘But I can only see your head.’

‘If that’s the way I look to you, there’s not much I can do about it, is there? But I definitely think you’re upset about something and that’s why you see me like that. What is it? Do you want to tell me why you were crying?’

‘Nobody likes me, that’s all.’

‘Here, stop,’ said Terry. ‘I like you and I hardly know you. But you’re hanging up there on the wall like a picture and I just don’t want you falling off and hurting yourself.’

He paused for a moment, and then he said, ‘What do you mean, nobody likes you?’

Gradually, he coaxed Sabina into telling him about her parents’ break-up, and how her mother seemed to hate her, and blame her for it. Then she told him that she had hardly any friends at school, except for Margot, and how she was feeling confused about her emotions. One moment she felt angry and irritable and the next she felt lonely and depressed.

‘You shouldn’t let it bother you,’ Terry told her. ‘My sister was just the same. One minute she was shouting and slamming doors. Next she was sobbing her heart out and saying that she was nothing. All girls go through it.’

Sabina looked at Terry’s head resting on the loft insulation and because of the way he was talking to her, it didn’t seem to matter that he was nothing but a head. He was like a character out of *Alice in Wonderland*, the caterpillar who was smoking a hookah or the Cheshire Cat or the Queen who was nothing but a playing card.

‘I tell you what, love,’ he said, in a confidential tone of voice, as if he were letting her into the darkest of secrets. ‘You’ve made yourself a friend now, and when you’ve got friends, they can sort things out for you, I promise you that. You wait and see.’

Sabina was going to ask him what he meant, but without saying anything else he gave her a nod and a wink and sank down into the attic floor and disappeared. She stared at the place where the insulation had swallowed him up, but there was no sign that he had been there, not even a dent.

She stood up, and she was trembling. She couldn't believe that she had seen his head lying there, and that he had talked to her in such a matter-of-fact way, as if it were completely normal for detached heads to have conversations with eleven-year-old girls.

She balanced her way back along the floorboards and sat down cross-legged in her nest. Her brain felt as if it were filled with a whirling tangle of barbed wire. Had she really seen Terry's head, and had he really spoken to her, or had she invented him, because of her distress and her unhappiness? Perhaps her mind had simply been reassuring her that she wouldn't always be alone and unloved, and had done it in the same way that Alice had been told by so many strange imaginary creatures that she wouldn't always be lost.

She closed her eyes and tried to relax. *He wasn't real*, she told herself. He couldn't have been real. You made him up, so that you wouldn't feel so tragic. Nobody else loves you and nobody else is taking care of you, so you're taking care of yourself.

She heard the laughter from next door again, and so she kept her eyes closed and pretended that she was somewhere else. The rain continued to patter on the tiles, and after a while she started to doze. Half an hour went by while she sat there, her head nodding forward, somewhere between dreaming and waking.

She was suddenly woken up, though, by a woman screaming. It was an extraordinary scream, more like a long wail of hopelessness than a scream of terror, or of pain.

She blinked, and listened, but the woman didn't scream again. She looked at the time on her Frozen wristwatch, and she couldn't believe how long she must have been sitting on her cushions, half-asleep. She stood up, made her way over to the trapdoor in the floor, and let down the attic steps with a creak and a bang.

'Mum?' she called, when she had climbed down to the landing. 'Mum, are you there?'

She used the stick to push the steps back up into the attic and close the trapdoor, and then she went downstairs.

‘Mum?’ she called again, but there was no answer. She could hear the television in the living room, and her mother hadn’t told her that she might be going out.

She went into the living room. A football match was playing on the television, although her mother never watched football. A half-empty glass of red wine was standing on the table beside the couch, as well as a broken digestive biscuit.

‘*Mum* – where are you?’

Sabina was beginning to feel distinctly uneasy now. Even if her mother didn’t love her, and had never wanted her, she would answer her, at the very least.

She went across the hallway to the kitchen. The kitchen door was closed, which was unusual, because they normally kept it open all the time. She tried to open it, but there was something heavy on the floor behind it, and she had to push it hard. She could feel this heavy object sliding across the vinyl floor, but then it was stopped by the legs of the kitchen table, so that she could force the door only three-quarters of the way open.

When she managed to step inside the kitchen, and saw what she had been pushing behind the door, she stumbled back against the wall as if somebody had roughly pushed her, and stood there, panting in horror.

It was her mother’s torso, headless and armless and legless, and soaked in blood. She knew it was her mother’s because of the green floral Monsoon blouse that she had been wearing.

She looked around, and the entire kitchen was sprayed with blood. The floor, the walls, the cupboard doors. It was even dripping down the windows. And in the sink, two severed legs and two severed arms had been jammed upright, feet and hands uppermost. Wedged between the legs and the arms was her mother’s severed head, almost unrecognisable because her hair was matted with blood, and her face was smeared in blood too. Her mouth was still wide open in what must have been

that last despairing scream that Sabina had heard from the attic.

Sabina left the kitchen, completely numb and walking as stiff-legged as a robot. All she could think of was Terry's detached head, and the last words he had spoken to her.

You've made yourself a friend now, and when you've got friends, they can sort things out for you, I promise you that. You wait and see.

11

Jamila and Jerry were about to leave for the day when Simon Fairbrother called out to them, and came hurrying across the reception area.

‘Sorry to be a pest, you two, but I think we may have another spooky one on our hands.’

‘Oh, please, tell us that you are joking,’ Jamila protested, in mock-exasperation. ‘We are still mystified by those two missing children.’

‘How did that go? Any result?’

‘So far, guv, not a sausage,’ Jerry told him. ‘In fact, it’s been one step forward and fifty-eight-and-a-half steps back.’

‘I’m just wondering if you found anything that might link their disappearance with any of those other cases?’

‘That’s what’s had us stumped. We met this witness, right, and he told us that he’d seen Adele and Archie being taken into one of the houses on Salcott Road by some old woman who was supposed to live there.’

‘Mrs Chibnall, that is what he said her name was,’ put in Jamila. ‘He said he knew her and she was a widow.’

‘That’s right,’ said Jerry. ‘Mrs Chibnall. There was one slight problem, though. When we went to take a gander at it – guess what? There was no house there.’

‘What? It sounds like this bloke was having you on.’

Jamila said, ‘I have checked the records of Wandsworth Borough Council. That house and the house next door, number 77 and number 79, they were both bombed during the Blitz on September fifteenth, 1941. They were never rebuilt, which is

quite unusual. But apparently the owner of both properties lived next door and he took the opportunity to extend his front garden.'

'But unless he was mucking you about, why would this bloke say that he saw the children being taken into a house there if there wasn't one?'

'No idea,' said Jerry. 'And when we went to ask him about it, he'd taken a powder.'

'Yet he claimed he'd seen them with an old woman?'

'Well, that's what makes us think this case might have something in common with the others. Adele told her friends that they had an old woman with them, didn't she, even though her friends couldn't see one. And more than that. This bloke said that it looked as if they were carrying this old woman's shopping for her, just like Adele told her friends. Yet how could *he* have known about that, unless he'd actually seen them?'

'I don't know,' said Simon Fairbrother. 'This gets nuttier by the minute. And you wait until I tell you about this. A woman was murdered this morning at Elsley Road. Dismembered, in her own kitchen, with her head and her arms and her legs all stuffed into the sink.'

'Oh, wonderful. Who's looking into it?'

'DI Baker. But he knows that you and DS Patel have been assigned to investigate the spooky side of these past few cases, and that's why he contacted me.'

'So what's spooky about this woman's murder?'

'Apparently, the victim's daughter was up in the attic when her mother was murdered. She told Baker that she was hiding up there because her mother had given her a right telling-off for breaking a plate.'

'She didn't witness the killing first-hand?'

'No, thank the Lord. But she heard her mother scream. And before that, she'd seen a head lying on the attic floor. You're

not going to believe this, but she said that it had been talking to her, this head.'

'A *head*?' Jamila asked him. 'I don't understand what you mean.'

'A head, that's what she said. No body, just a head. A man's head. She said she might have been having a nightmare, but she was pretty sure that she wasn't. Anyway, she told this head all about her mother being mean to her, and the head promised to sort her life out for her.'

'A talking head, lying on the floor,' Jerry repeated. 'Now we've got a bloke with no feet, another bloke's legs hanging from the ceiling, and another bloke who's only half a bloke. Not to mention an old woman who doesn't exist who lives in a house that isn't there anymore.'

'I thought that cracking this kind of case was what you were good at,' said Simon Fairbrother.

'Only by accident,' said Jerry. 'And it does make it easier if the perps that we're looking for are all in one piece, and not invisible.'

'We need to talk to this girl who says she saw this head,' said Jamila. 'Do you have her name, and where we can find her?'

'Sabina Ferris. Her mother's name was Lilian.'

*

Sabina was sitting in the window seat of her aunt's living room in Wimbledon. She was wrapped in a pink knitted blanket, and holding a mug of hot chocolate that had long since gone cold, so that it had a wrinkled skin on top of it.

She was staring out at the garden, and the sparrows that were pecking at the bird feeder hanging from one the alder trees. When her aunt brought Jamila and Jerry into the room, she didn't turn around.

'She's still suffering from shock,' her aunt whispered. 'The doctor's given her some medication for it. It's made her a bit dopey, so I'm not too sure if she'll be able to answer all of

your questions. You won't upset her, will you? And please don't keep her long.'

'Don't worry,' Jamila told her. 'We have plenty of experience when it comes to witnesses who have seen terrible things.'

Jamila and Jerry went up to Sabina and Jamila sat down in the basketwork armchair opposite her.

'Those little birds look hungry,' she smiled.

Sabina nodded.

'Sabina... my name is Jamila and this is my partner, Jerry. We are police detectives and we need to ask you one or two questions about what happened today.'

'My mummy's dead,' said Sabina, still without taking her eyes off the sparrows.

'Yes, we know that, and we're very sorry.'

'She didn't love me but I didn't want her dead.'

'Of course not. Sometimes we have people in our lives who don't like us at all, and we don't like them either, but that doesn't mean we wish them any harm.'

'I'm worried it was my fault.'

'What do you mean? How could it possibly have been your fault?'

'I told the man in the attic that Mummy had been cross with me, and that she was always shouting at me for no reason. He said that he would sort it out. So what if it was *him* that killed Mummy?'

Jerry pulled across a leather tuffet and sat down between Jamila and Sabina.

'This man in the attic you were talking to, love. You told the detectives who interviewed you earlier that all you could see was his head.'

Sabina said nothing for a long while. Three sparrows were fighting each other around the bird feeder, because there was

hardly any seed left. Jerry waited patiently for her to answer. He could tell by the way she was frowning that she would. She was obviously trying to think of a way to tell them about the head without sounding stupid or childish.

‘His head... his head was lying on the floor. I’m not sure if he was real or if I imagined him. When he disappeared, there was no hole there, so I don’t know how he got his head through.’

‘But he spoke to you?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He told me his name. He said it was Terry but everybody called him Tel.’

‘He didn’t tell you his last name?’

Sabina shook her head again. ‘He told me not to worry because all girls feel the same as I do when they get to my age. He said his sister did. He said I shouldn’t worry if I didn’t have very many friends because he was going to be my friend.’

‘And then you told him that your relationship with your mother wasn’t going well?’

‘Yes. That’s when he said he would sort my life out for me. But if I’d known that Mummy was going to be killed—’

‘You don’t know that this Tel had anything to do with it,’ said Jerry. ‘If he was only a head, then how could he?’

‘He said that just because I couldn’t see the rest of him, that didn’t mean the rest of him wasn’t there.’

Jerry looked across at Jamila. What Sabina was telling them was beginning to have uncomfortable echoes of the witness reports from the Kenneth Treagus shooting and the slicing of Kathleen Hartley and the blinding of Yusuf Nadeem. In particular, it bore a distinct similarity to the statements from the children at Brookwood School, about the legs they had seen in the ceiling.

‘You told all this to the detectives who talked to you earlier on?’ Jamila asked her.

Sabina nodded.

‘What did he sound like, this Tel?’ said Jerry. ‘Was he posh, or was he ordinary – you know, like one of those newsreaders on the telly? Or was he a bit rough?’

‘He sounded like one of the people in *EastEnders*.’

‘I see. A bit “ow’s yer father”?’

‘Yes.’

Jamila said, ‘Did he give you any idea at all how he had managed to appear in your attic?’

‘No. He said he’d been wounded and couldn’t get around without a wheelchair. But I asked him how he had got into the house and there was one thing that he did say. He said he wasn’t in my house. He was in his flat, that’s what he said. Number 12, Elsley Gardens.’

‘You told the other detectives about this?’

Sabina nodded again. ‘Yes, but I don’t think they believed me. About the head, I mean.’

‘So he said he was in number 12, Elsley Gardens. But your house is—’

‘Number 37, Elsley Road. There isn’t anywhere called Elsley Gardens. Not that I’ve seen, anyway.’

Jamila took out her phone and quickly prodded at it.

‘You are right. There is Elsley House and Elsley School and of course Elsley Road where you live. But no Elsley Gardens. And if it was number 12, it sounds as if he was referring to a whole block of flats.’

Sabina at last looked away from the sparrows. Her eyelashes were sparkling with tears.

‘Was it my fault, do you think?’

Jamila put down her phone, reached across and took hold of Sabina’s hands, and squeezed them.

‘No, sweetheart. You had nothing to do with what happened to your mother. This world has some terrible people in it, I’m sorry to say. Terrible people who do terrible things. All we can do is pray that we never meet them.’

*

Back at the station, Jamila immediately switched on her desktop computer and started to scroll through the records of Wandsworth Borough Council.

Edge came in carrying a mug of tea and asked them how it was going.

‘I’d say about a hundred and fifty times more difficult to work out than *The Sunday Times* cryptic crossword,’ Jerry told him. ‘And it doesn’t help that half the clues are missing. Not to mention half the bloody suspects.’

‘I’ve been catching up on that woman who had her head and her arms and her legs chopped off,’ said Edge. ‘We can’t make head nor tail of what happened to her, neither, if that’s not a tasteless way of putting it.’

‘Really? We’ve been talking to her daughter. She’s totally convinced that she saw this bloke’s bonce lying on her attic floor, and that he was talking to her. The trouble is, we almost think we believe her.’

Edge took a sip of tea and then wrinkled up his nose. ‘Bleugh! The milk’s off!’

‘So what’s the SP with the mother?’

Edge spat and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he said, ‘The Martian reckons she was cut up with a hacksaw. There was no sign of it, though, the hacksaw, or any other kind of saw, for that matter. But this is what’s really confusing – she was killed in the kitchen and it was blood all over. The Martian said it couldn’t have been bloodier if you’d filled up a bucket with blood and chucked it all over the place.’

‘Well, it would be, wouldn’t it, since she was chopped up like that?’

‘Yes. But here’s what’s doing our collective heads in. There are no footprints, except for the victim’s and her daughter’s, and her daughter’s are only by the door. No fingerprints, neither. Not on the door handles, not on the taps, not on the table – nowhere. It was like there was nobody else there, except of course that there was no way that the victim could have cut herself up and stuffed her own head and arms and legs into the sink.’

‘I give up,’ said Jerry. ‘Like I said before, maybe these cases aren’t connected at all. Maybe it’s a wild goose chase, or maybe we’re chasing after a wild goose with no head. Or a wild goose with no legs. Or only half a wild goose.’

Jamila said, ‘I have found Elsley Gardens. There is even an estate agent’s brochure from when the flats were first built.’

Jerry went over and looked at the picture on Jamila’s computer screen. The brochure was dated 1924 and it showed a three-storey block of flats, painted white, with the jade-green roof tiles that were popular at that time. Prices for a two-bedroomed flat started at £275.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Jerry. ‘If I had a time machine, I could go back to 1924 and buy the whole bloody block on my Mastercard. I’d be a property tycoon!’

‘They didn’t have Mastercards in those days,’ said Edge. ‘And I’m taking this tea back. Yuck. It’s enough to make a maggot gag.’

Jamila held up her hand. ‘Wait,’ she said. ‘The council records show that Elsley Gardens was bombed on the night of June the third, 1940.’

‘What?’

‘Yes. Sixteen flats, almost completely demolished. And this street map shows the new houses that were built in 1949 in its place. Numbers 33 to 39, Elsley Road.’

Jerry stared at her. ‘So Sabina was talking to the head of a man who said he was living in a block of flats that hasn’t been there for more than eighty years?’

‘If we believe her, yes,’ said Jamila. ‘She admitted herself that she could have been dreaming. But do you not think that there may be a pattern emerging here? Brookwood School was built on a bomb site, and number 79 Salcott Road is still a bomb site, and now we have number 37 Elsley Road and that is a bomb site too. We do not know about Bolingbroke Grove, where the Treaguses live, or Bennerley Road, where Kathleen Hartley was murdered. But I can check.’

‘What about the shop where that bloke was blinded? Where was that?’

‘I think it was Northcote Road. I do not know the number but it will take me only a moment to find it in Audrey Morrison’s report.’

‘I don’t like the way this is going,’ said Jerry. ‘It reminds me of what you said about those jinns living in people’s houses right next to them. The difference is that these legs and heads aren’t only appearing from some parallel world, are they? It’s like they’ve come from some other time as well. Like, eat your heart out, Doctor Who. This is time travel for real, not in some stupid police box.’

‘Time is relative,’ said Jamila. ‘Did you know that because of the effect of gravity on time, your head is slightly older than your feet?’

Edge said, ‘Really? The way my feet pen-and-ink, I’d say it was the other way around.’

12

‘This is you!’ the young woman tram conductor called out to Adele and Archie, as the tram whined to a stop.

They stood up and made their way to the front exit, squeezing past the standing passengers whose coats all smelled of body odour and cigarette smoke.

As they climbed down the steps, the conductor said, ‘Kennington Lane this is... St Oswald’s Place is first on your right down that way. It’s only a couple of hundred yards.’

‘Thank you,’ said Adele. She felt completely unreal, as if she were asleep but couldn’t wake herself up. She and Archie crossed over to the pavement and watched the tram moaning away.

They looked around. It had stopped raining, although the roads were still wet and shiny. There was hardly any traffic, and the few cars and vans that were driving up and down Kennington Lane were all old-fashioned, as if they had come out of a motor museum. Every vehicle had metal masks over its headlights, with narrow slits in them, and their sidelights were painted black. The air was foggy with their pungent exhaust fumes.

‘Let’s go,’ said Adele. ‘The sooner we find this Old Scratch person the better.’

They started to walk westwards. When they reached the first corner and were waiting on the kerb for a bread van to pass, Archie pointed upwards, and said, ‘Look, Ad! Look at those!’

Floating high above the rooftops, almost as high as the clouds, they could see nine or ten fat silvery balloons, with fins. They were bobbing up and down and swinging from side

to side, but they didn't move forward, so it was apparent that they must be tethered to the ground.

As Adele and Archie continued walking, more and more balloons came into view. They began to realise that there were scores of them floating over London, like an aerial Armada at anchor.

'Perhaps it's some kind of an air show,' said Adele. 'The Queen's birthday, something like that.'

'Whatever,' said Archie. 'I think they're well cool. I don't know why we've never seen them before.'

They reached St Oswald's Place. One side was lined with council flats, with washing hanging out on the balconies. On the opposite side, a high brick wall ran from one end of the street to the other. Set in this wall were several forbidding-looking doors, and windows that were protected by grilles or bars. Inside each grimy window they could see nothing but darkness.

Number 9 was almost at the far end of the street, behind a Victorian church. It had a black-painted metal door with a spyhole in it, but no knocker and no bell push. Adele banged on it with her fist.

They waited, but there was no answer. Rain began to prickle along the pavement, and in the distance they could hear the monotonous droning sound of propeller aircraft. Adele banged on the door again, and called out, 'Is there anybody in there?'

'What are we going to do if there isn't?' said Archie. He was trying hard not to sound panicky, but he was jiggling up and down, as if he needed to go to the toilet.

Adele banged a third time, with both fists. '*Is there anybody in there?*' she screamed.

She stepped back, panting. Nearly half a minute went by, and there was still no response. Then, from behind the door, a dry woman's voice said, 'Who are you?'

'My name's Adele and my brother Archie's with me. Our house was knocked down and we didn't know where to go, so

Mrs Chibnall said we should come and see somebody called Scratch.'

'Mrs Chibnall?' the woman replied.

'Yes. She lives at 79 Salcott Road. She said that Scratch might be able to help us.'

'Did she now?'

'Yes. Do you think we could see him? We don't know what else to do.'

There was another pause, and then they heard bolts being drawn back, and locks turning. With a scraping sound, the black-painted door was slowly opened up, and inside a woman was standing in a narrow hallway. She was tall, with a long almond-shaped face and hooded eyes. Her light grey dress had high padded shoulders, and she was wearing clumpy high heels, which made her even taller.

Adele was most struck by her dark brown hair, which was styled in two enormous rolls on the top of her head.

'Oh – you're not from here, are you?' the woman asked them.

'Well, no, we live in Northcote Road. At least, we did until our house was knocked down. A man told us it had been bombed, although we don't know how it could have been.'

'I didn't mean that. I meant that you're not from here and now, are you?'

'I don't understand,' said Adele.

'Well, you'd best come inside anyway, and see what the governor has to say.'

'I'm not sure,' Adele told her. She looked past the woman, into the shadowy hallway, and she could see ragged strips of wallpaper hanging off the walls, and broken pieces of window frame lying on the floor, with shattered triangles of glass. A brindled cat suddenly appeared at the very end of the hallway, and paused, and she saw its yellow eyes reflected before it vanished.

‘If you don’t come in and see the governor, what will you do?’ the woman asked her. ‘You’ll be stuck, won’t you? Where will you sleep and where will you eat? It’s raining already and you’ll catch your death if you stay out here. Where are you going to find yourselves shelter, and dry clothes to change into?’

‘I don’t understand what’s happened to us. All we want to do is go home. I mean home like it was.’

‘No, you don’t mean like it was. You mean like it’s going to be.’

Adele felt so confused and unhappy that she started to cry. The woman stepped out into the rain and put her arm around her shoulders. ‘Come on inside, both of you. You need to talk to the governor, you do. Then we’ll see what we can do for you.’

She ushered Adele and Archie into the hallway.

‘Go down to the end. Mind the broken glass. That raid we had three nights ago blew all the back windows in.’

They crunched along to the end of the hallway, turned right, and found themselves in a gloomy kitchen, with a huge black cast-iron stove and olive-green tiles. The brindled cat was sitting on the wooden draining board, staring at them with yellow-eyed hostility, as if it were thinking, *Intruders – what are you doing here in my territory?*

‘Harris – I’ll feed you in a minute,’ said the woman. Then – to Adele and Archie, ‘He’s in luck today, I managed to buy him some coley.’

She led them through into an equally gloomy living room. It was furnished with a sagging brown sofa and two ill-matched armchairs. A large radio with a circular dial stood on a side table, and beside it there was a magazine rack crammed with newspapers and several copies of a magazine called *Picture Post*.

The reason the living room was so dark was that thick blankets had been hung up to cover the windows instead of

curtains, and behind the blankets the windows had been boarded up.

The room smelled of mould, and it had another sweetish smell to it too, as if about a week ago somebody had urinated on the carpet.

‘Sit down,’ said the woman. ‘What did you say your names were? Adele and Archie, is it? My name’s Veronica. I suppose you could call me the housekeeper, although I take care of everything outside the house as well as in.’

‘Where’s Scratch?’ asked Adele. ‘I asked Mrs Chibnall if we could call him that, and she said yes. But should we call him Mr Scratch?’

‘Ha! Nobody has called him “Mr Scratch” in a very long time. Not since – well, you don’t want to hear all of that. You probably wouldn’t believe me, anyway, even if you knew what I was talking about.’

Adele frowned and said, ‘I’m sorry?’

‘It doesn’t matter. You’re not interested in what’s past, are you? Especially what’s long past.’

‘Can we see him? Mrs Chibnall said he might be able to help us. I mean, that’s what we’ve come here for.’

‘Of course, my dear. I’ll take you to him now. He’s in the cellar because he has a sensitivity to light. That’s why I have to do all the shopping and run any errands that need to be run and I have to look after the children.’

‘You have children here?’

‘Never mind. They’re all out at the moment, running errands. But let me take you downstairs to see Scratch.’

Veronica led them out of the living room, back through the kitchen, and into the hallway. There was a door opposite the kitchen door, which she opened up outwards. Inside, it was totally dark, but they could see wooden stairs leading downwards, with a rope for a handrail.

‘Scratch!’ Veronica called out. ‘Are you awake? I’ve brought you those two children that Edith Chibnall was calling

about! Is it all right to send them down?’

For a long moment there was silence, but then they heard a groaning, whistling voice say, ‘Yes. Send them down.’

‘All right, he can talk to you,’ said Veronica. ‘Be very careful down the stairs. Hold on to that rope so you don’t lose your footing. And when you reach the bottom, all you have to do is stand there. You won’t be able to see Scratch, but he’ll be able to see you.’

Archie said, ‘Do we have to go down there? Can’t we talk to him from up here?’

‘There’s no need to be frightened, young Archie,’ Veronica told him, laying her right hand on his shoulder. ‘Scratch isn’t going to hurt you.’ It was then that Adele noticed not only the elaborate silver rings she was wearing, with a skull and a crescent moon and a goat’s head on them, but that she had only three fingers.

Adele went down the stairs first, and Archie followed her. She gripped the rope tightly, because the staircase sloped slightly to the left, and each tread creaked as they stepped on it.

The cellar was so dark that it was impossible to see how large it was. When they reached the bottom of the staircase, though, and their shoes shuffled on the concrete floor, Adele had the feeling from the echoes that it was huge. It was chilly down there, and she could hear a faint dripping sound. She could smell something really unpleasant too, like rotten chicken.

‘Scratch?’ she said, trying not to sound intimidated. ‘I’m Adele and this is my brother, Archie. Mrs Chibnall said you could help us get back home, the way it was.’

For a few moments, all they could hear was a heavy breathing sound, with a distinct whine to it, as if Scratch were asthmatic.

Then he said, ‘You’ve slid, that’s what you’ve done. You’ve slid. One time’s been crossing over another, and what you’ve done is – you’ve *slid*.’

‘I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you mean. All we want to do is get back to the way things were. We know where we are, but everything’s different. There are trams, and funny old cars, and balloons in the sky.’

‘You know where you are, but you don’t know when you are. That’s the trouble.’

‘So *when* are we?’ Archie challenged him, suddenly brave.

Scratch wheezed in and out again, as if he were making up his mind whether to answer or not. Then he said, ‘The year of Your Lord, nineteen hundred and forty-one.’

‘Nineteen forty-one? It can’t be!’

‘You’ve seen it for yourself, my child. What do you think those balloons are for? They’re barrage balloons, so that the German bombers can’t fly too low.’

‘This is wartime?’

‘Don’t they teach you anything at school? We’ve been at war with Germany for nearly two years now. Who do you think bombed your house?’

‘But it wasn’t bombed before,’ Adele protested. ‘We’ve lived in that house all our lives.’

‘It has been bombed, but it’s going to be rebuilt. But not yet.’

‘How can we get back to it, like it was?’

‘You mean like it will be?’

‘Yes. I suppose so.’

‘Well, my child, if we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement, I can return you to where you came from. It’s certainly within my power. There’s proof of it from one of the most famous Englishmen who ever drew breath.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

Scratch coughed, and coughed again, and then spat.

‘What I mean is, if you do something for me, I can do something for you. You scratch Scratch’s back and Scratch

will scratch yours, so to speak.’

‘What do you expect us to do?’

‘A little fund-raising. I’ll arrange for a couple of the other children to go with you. Veronica will tell you what to do.’

‘What do you mean by “fund-raising”?’

‘Taking money from people without going to all the bother of asking for it.’

‘You mean stealing it?’

‘There! Good girl! You’re not as dim as I thought you were!’

For a split second, in the blackness, Adele glimpsed the reflection from two amber eyes. Then it was all dark again, and the only way she could tell that Scratch was still there was the sound of his laboured breathing.

‘What if we say no, we won’t do it?’ she said. ‘We could get caught, couldn’t we, and arrested?’

Scratch coughed again. ‘If you say no, you’ll have to stay here for the rest of your lives. But you might get used to it. When you grow up, who knows, you might both meet someone you fall for, and get married, and raise children of your own. That could be interesting! You might even give birth to your own mother!’

‘This is a nightmare,’ sobbed Adele. ‘This is nothing but a nightmare.’

‘Yes,’ Scratch replied. ‘But that’s life for you, my darling. Life is a nightmare. From beginning to end, it’s a nightmare.’

13

Back up in the living room, Veronica told Adele and Archie to sit down and wait while she found out where Scratch wanted them to go ‘fund-raising’.

‘But once we’ve stolen as much as he wants us to steal, will we be able to get back home?’ Adele asked her.

Veronica switched on a table lamp beside the sofa, and it lit up her face like a witch looking down into a cauldron.

‘Scratch does many things that people can’t understand, but he always keeps his word. If he says that he will send you back to where and when you came from, then he will. And don’t you worry, if he happens to forget, I’ll nag him about it. My real name’s Veronica Crawford but everybody who has ever known me has called me “Veronica Vex”.’

They sat in uncomfortable silence for almost an hour while outside it gradually grew dark. Archie began to nod off, and several times he sat up with a sudden jerk. Veronica chain-smoked three pungent cigarettes, crushing them out when she had finished in an ashtray that was already crowded with butts. The smoke made Adele feel as if she were choking, and she was so thirsty that she had a sore throat, but she didn’t like to ask Veronica for anything to eat or drink.

A sad, distant clock struck seven. Almost immediately afterwards there was a loud knocking on the floorboards underneath the living-room carpet. Veronica stood up and said, ‘There – that’s Scratch. He’s ready to tell me what he has in mind for you. Wait here a moment and I’ll be back.’

She left the living room and they heard her open the cellar door and make her way down the rickety stairs.

Archie looked at Adele and said, 'We could just run away.'

'Don't be stupid. Where would we run to? We've got hardly any money and if Scratch was telling us the truth we're right in the middle of the war.'

'Yes, but this Scratch is well scary.'

'As long as we do what he wants, I don't think he's going to hurt us. And if Veronica's telling the truth, we'll be able to go back home. Mummy and Daddy must be so worried about us by now.'

'But what if he was lying? And what if Veronica was lying too? What if he *can't* send us back home?'

'Don't think like that, Archie. We got here somehow, didn't we, so there has to be a way of getting back.'

They heard Veronica climbing the cellar steps again and then she came back into the living room. She had an odd, distracted look in her eyes as if she had just remembered something important that she should have done, but now it was too late.

'Another two lads are on their way back here, Tommy and Nigel. They won't be long. Scratch wants you to go with them down to Kennington Lane. It's not far, only a couple of minutes' walk. There's a pub on the corner called The Wayfarer, and Tommy and Nigel will take you inside.'

'We're not old enough to go into pubs.'

'You're not going in to drink, my love. All you have to do is go from one customer to the next looking sorry for yourselves. Tell them that you've been bombed out, and your mum and dad are seriously injured in the hospital, and out of the goodness of their hearts can they kindly spare you a tanner.'

Adele and Archie blinked at her in mystification.

'What's a "tanner"?''

'Sixpence. They might not give you as much as that. They might only give you a threepenny bit. If you're lucky they might give you more, maybe a couple of bob even. But that's not what's important. While they're digging around in their

pockets to find you some change, all you have to do is accidentally knock their beer into their lap.'

'What? Won't that make them angry with us?'

'You and your brother are two poor unfortunate children who have lost their home and may soon be orphans too. How can they be angry with you?'

'But why do I have to knock their beer into their lap?'

'Because that will catch everyone's attention. They'll all be laughing at this poor fellow who now looks as if he's pissed his bags, and meanwhile Tommy and Nigel will be fundraising.'

'I still don't understand.'

Veronica smiled and made a pinching gesture with the fingers of her right hand, as if she were lifting an invisible wallet out of an imaginary pocket.

*

They waited ten minutes more, and then they heard a postman's knock at the front door. Veronica went to answer it, and came back into the living room with two boys. One of them was tall and skinny, with black hair that stuck up like a lavatory brush, and the other was tubby and freckled, with tight ginger curls. Both were wearing grey blazers that looked as if they had once been part of a school uniform, because stray threads were still dangling from their breast pockets where their badges must have been pulled off.

Their grey flannel trousers were drooping and their shoes were scuffed, with broken laces.

Veronica laid her hand on the tall boy's shoulder. 'This is Tommy,' she said, and then she ruffled the tubby boy's curls as if he were a Labradoodle. 'And this here is Nigel. Lads – this young lady is Adele and this is her brother, Archie. They've only just arrived, but Scratch has decided that they're going to be your diversion for this evening, down at The Wayfarer. It'll give them their first experience.'

Both boys looked at Adele and Archie with expressions that Adele could only interpret as a mixture of disinterest and pity.

‘Couldn’t Dougie and Jean have done it?’ asked Tommy.

‘Dougie and Jean are over at the Mecca because there’s a dance on.’

‘All right, then. Any chance of a sarnie before we go? My belly thinks my throat’s been cut.’

‘You can have one when you get back. Ollie lifted a tin of Spam this morning.’

Tommy turned back to Adele and Archie. ‘Well, come on, then. We haven’t got all night.’

‘Have fun,’ said Veronica, with a grin. For the first time, Adele saw how crooked and brown her teeth were.

Tommy and Nigel led the way through the front door and out into St Oswald’s Place. There was a fresh smell of recent rain and outside it was almost as dark as it had been in Scratch’s cellar. There were no street lights and every window of the council flats on the opposite side of the street was blacked out.

Tommy took a torch out of his blazer pocket. Brown masking tape was stuck over most of its lens, and when he switched it on, he shone it downwards, onto the wet paving slabs.

‘This way,’ he said, and he began to walk along the gutter, flicking the torch from side to side.

‘Where did you two come from?’

‘Northcote Road, just near Wandsworth Common,’ said Adele.

‘I didn’t mean *where*, I meant what year.’

Adele told him, and Nigel said, ‘Blimey.’

‘Why? What year do you come from?’

‘Nineteen fifty-eight.’

‘Nineteen fifty-eight? I mean, honestly? So this really is 1941?’

‘What do you think? Look – everything’s blacked out. Moaning Minnie will be starting up soon, and the Jerries’ll be coming over.’

They walked on further, and then Adele said, ‘Can’t you get back to 1958?’

‘What? How are we going to do that?’

‘We don’t know how we got here but Scratch promised to send us back. Why hasn’t he done the same for you?’

‘Come on – you didn’t believe him, did you? He’s not going to send you back! He’s going to make you part of his gang, like we are. Scratch’s Army, that’s what he calls us.’

‘But he promised,’ said Adele. ‘And Veronica told us that he always keeps his promises.’

‘He wouldn’t know a promise if it jumped out and bit him on the bum,’ said Tommy. ‘How long do you think Nigel and me have been here? Since last Christmas, that’s how long Nigel and me have been here. And some of the other kids have been here longer. There’s one kid, Freddie, he’s been here since the Easter before last, and he comes from 1924.’

Adele’s eyes filled up with tears. She swallowed, and tried not to sob, but she couldn’t help herself. Tommy stopped and shone his torch at her and said, ‘We don’t know how we got here either. We were walking to school and we turned the corner and suddenly everything was all different – like it is now. All these old-fashioned cars and barrage balloons floating in the air.’

‘So how did you end up at Scratch’s house?’

‘We stopped and asked this woman where we were and she said we needed to come along with her, and she’d help us. It was Veronica, and she took us straight to Scratch. He said that if we ran a few errands for him, he’d make sure that we got back to where we came from.’

‘But of course he didn’t,’ Nigel put in. ‘And we’ve had to go out pilfering for him ever since. Every time we’ve asked him if he could send us back, he says “one more little job for me, boys, then I’ll think about it”.’

‘You’ll meet the rest of the gang at dinnertime,’ said Tommy. ‘There’s eleven of us now, altogether, eight boys and three girls. Not including you two, so that makes thirteen. There’s four or five grown-up men too, but they don’t show up every night. They come and they go.’

Adele wiped her eyes. ‘So where do you all sleep?’

‘There’s three rooms upstairs, with blankets. But when there’s an air raid, we all take our blankets down to Scratch’s cellar.’

They carried on walking until they reached Kennington Lane. They could see The Wayfarer pub a few hundred yards further along the road, a square brick Victorian building with a small yard in front of it, and a wide bow window.

‘When you’re down in the cellar, can you actually see Scratch?’ asked Archie. ‘When we went down there it was too dark to see what he looked like.’

‘No,’ said Tommy. ‘When we go down there we’re allowed to take a lamp but Scratch is always hiding behind this thick grey curtain at the other end. We’ve never seen him, none of us.’

‘We saw some orange eyes,’ said Archie.

‘Yes, we’ve seen those too,’ said Nigel. ‘Perhaps he’s allergic to something, or he drinks too much gin. Or perhaps he doesn’t get enough sleep.’

As they reached The Wayfarer, Adele said, ‘What if we call the police on him? He’s treating us like kind of slaves, isn’t he – making us go out and pick pockets for him?’

‘No!’ said Tommy, furiously shaking his head. ‘One of the very first things he told us was that if the coppers caught us, and we got taken to a cop shop, we should never mention his name or let on where he is. He said that if we did, he would

send out one of his men to find us, and that we'd be killed in the most horrible way we could think of.'

'Do you think he really would, or was he just trying to frighten you?'

'You wait until you see the men that work for him. There's one called Ronnie and he really scares me, just by the way he looks at you.'

'And there's Starkey,' said Nigel. 'He scares me even more. He's got this horrible laugh. And he always smells like dead fish.'

Tommy nodded towards the pub door. From inside, they could hear loud conversation and laughter and piano music. 'Come on, let's go in and do the business. The sooner we go in, the sooner we'll be able to come back out again. We'll go through to the saloon bar because the customers there always have much more dosh. And remember – as soon as we're back out the door, run like fun.'

He pushed open the pub's door and immediately they were overwhelmed by the noise and the music and the smoke. The public bar was so crowded that they had to push and wriggle their way in between the drinkers. A fat man in a straining waistcoat was banging the keyboard of an upright piano, while the men and women gathered around him were singing 'London Pride'.

Archie flapped his hand in front of his nose and Adele nodded. The combined smells of cigarette smoke and body odour and stale beer were so strong that they felt they might suffocate.

Tommy led them to the back of the public bar and through the door into the saloon bar. It was crowded in here too, but quieter, and apart from all the customers lining the bar the rest of them were sitting at tables. Everybody in the bar was smoking, so the air was hazy and the ceiling was yellow with nicotine.

Two or three customers frowned at the four children as they came in, but the rest were too busy chatting and drinking to

pay them any attention. The barmaid had just changed a barrel and was yanking again and again at one of the beer pumps to prime it, so she didn't notice them either.

'Go on,' Tommy urged Adele, giving her a nudge. 'That bloke over by the window looks like a prize plum.'

The man he pointed out was middle-aged, wearing a three-piece tweed suit. He had a neatly clipped moustache and chestnut-coloured hair that was parted in the centre and slicked down with hair oil. He was drinking a Scotch and soda and smoking a cheroot, both indications that he was better off than most. His companions were a woman with scarlet lipstick and eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own, and an older white-haired man whose shoulders were shaking because he was laughing. The older man had a pint glass of beer on the table in front of him, and it was still almost full.

'I'm scared,' said Adele.

'Remember what Veronica told you. That's all you have to do. Look all sad and say that your house has had a direct hit and your mum and dad are in St Bart's. Ask them if they could spare you a few coppers so that you and your brother could buy some fish and chips.'

Adele took hold of Archie's hand and the two of them approached the table where the man in the tweed suit was sitting. He was right in the middle of telling a joke, but he stopped in mid-sentence as they came up to him.

'Well, now, and what are you two after?'

'I think they're after a taste of your Scotch,' said the older man, with a wink.

'Please,' said Adele. And then, all in one breath, she blurted out, 'We don't like to ask you but our house was bombed and our mother and father were badly hurt and now they're in the hospital and they may die and we don't have anyone to look after us.'

'I hope you don't expect *us* to look after you!' blurted the woman with the scarlet lipstick. She sounded as if she had already downed at least three gin-and-its. 'I've done my share

of bringing up children, thank you! I don't want to go through that again!'

'No, of course not. But do you think you could spare us sixpence?'

'Sixpence?' said the older man. 'I could buy myself another pint for that much!'

The man in the tweed suit leaned back in his chair and dug his hand into one of his waistcoat pockets. He took out first one coin, and then another, and then another, and laid them on the table. Adele had never seen coins anything like them: two were large and circular and dark brown, and the third was small and nickel-coloured and multiple-sided. All were embossed with a picture of a man's head.

'There you are. Fivepence. That's all the loose change I've got on me at the moment.'

Adele glanced at Tommy, who was standing by the window. He made a scooping gesture with both hands, indicating that she should pick the money up. Then he made a flapping gesture, as if to tell her that now was the time to knock over the pint of beer.

Adele said, 'Thank you very, very much.' She collected up the coins and gave them to Archie to put into his pocket, but at the moment when she was about to spill his pint of beer, the older man picked up his glass and took a drink from it.

'So... where do you live?' the man in the tweed suit asked her. 'Before you were bombed out, I mean.'

'Northcote Road, by the common.'

'That's funny. I drove past there only this morning and I couldn't see any bomb damage down that way at all.'

'Oh,' said Adele. She looked at Tommy again, and he was waving his hands frantically now, urging her to hurry up.

'You *are* telling us the truth, aren't you?' the man in the tweed suit asked her.

Adele couldn't think what to say, but at that moment the older man put down his pint. She half-turned and then turned

back again, swinging her elbow so it struck the side of the glass and tipped it over. More than half a pint of beer splashed onto the tabletop and onto the crotch of the man's tweed trousers.

'Oh, Jesus!' he shouted, pushing back his chair and jumping to his feet.

Almost all the other drinkers in the saloon bar turned to see what all the commotion was about. There was whistling and laughter.

'Haven't wet yourself, have you, Richard?' one of them called out. 'Don't tell me you've forgotten where the gents are!'

Adele backed away, taking hold of Archie's hand. 'I'm so sorry!' she told the man in the tweed suit. 'It was an accident!' But he was too busy tugging at his soaking wet trousers to answer her.

She looked quickly around. Between the laughing customers she saw Nigel on the opposite side of the bar, dipping his hand into a woman's bag that she had left on the floor next to her chair. He lifted out her purse and stuffed it into his blazer pocket.

Next to the window, Tommy was standing behind a man in a green corduroy jacket. His hand slipped into the man's inside pocket and took out his wallet. Both boys were so quick and so dextrous that if Adele hadn't known what they were up to, she wouldn't have seen them doing it. They were almost like stage magicians.

As Tommy circled around the back of the bar, though, looking for more pockets to pick, they suddenly heard the eerie wailing of air-raid sirens. To Adele, they sounded like a chorus of howling women.

'What's that horrible noise?' said Archie, and a woman sitting next to him stared at him as if he were stupid.

As soon as the sirens started to wail, the mood in the saloon bar abruptly changed. The laughter stopped, and all the customers hurried to finish what was left of their drinks.

Tommy was standing close behind a short bald-headed man who was leaning up against the bar. His hand was reaching into the man's inside pocket, but as the man swallowed the last of his beer and put down his glass, he turned around and realised what Tommy was doing.

'Hey! Get off out of it!' he shouted, slapping Tommy's arm.

Tommy lifted both hands and pleaded, 'Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!' and backed away, but the man said, 'Just a minute! I *know* you, you young bastard! I've seen you before, in The Duchy! A whole lot of wallets went missing then too, and we wondered if it was you what had pinched them!'

The man in the green corduroy jacket patted his chest and said 'Here! My wallet's gone!' and a woman on the other side of the bar called out, 'My purse! Someone's stolen my purse!'

Abruptly, Tommy and Nigel tried to make a scrambling run for the door, but four other men seized their arms and pinned them up against the bar. Outside, the sirens continued to moan, and the pub was rapidly emptying out. The rest of the customers were drinking up and then hurrying across the road to the nearest shelter.

Adele tugged at Archie's sleeve. She nodded towards the door, indicating that they should slip out of the pub before the man in the tweed suit realised that they had been working with Tommy and Nigel, and that Adele had tipped beer over him to create a diversion. At the moment, the men who had caught Tommy and Nigel were too busy frisking them to retrieve their wallets and their purses and even a Parker fountain pen that Nigel had stolen.

'You wait till the all-clear's sounded,' one of the men told Tommy and Nigel. 'Then it's straight down to Kennington nick for you two.'

Adele and Archie sneaked out of the saloon bar. They shuffled their way through the public bar, caught behind the fat pianist and a woman carrying a bewildered-looking toy fox terrier, but at last they had pushed their way through the blackout curtain and were out on the street. Archie said, 'What are we going to do now?'

‘We can’t go back to Scratch’s, can we?’ said Adele. ‘From what Tommy said he’s never going to send us back home, and he’s just going to make us go on stealing things until *we* get caught too.’

‘But where are we going to sleep? And where are we going to get something to eat?’

Searchlights were already criss-crossing the sky over London, and they could hear the low, distant droning of aircraft engines.

‘There must be other children like us,’ said Adele. ‘We were pretending that our house was bombed, weren’t we, and that our parents were in hospital. But there must be real children whose houses have really been bombed. Where do they go?’

At that moment the night was shaken by the staccato banging of anti-aircraft fire, and the droning of aircraft engines grew louder and louder, until it became a thunderous, grinding roar. They heard whistling, and then deafening explosions.

A man and two women who had been drinking in The Wayfarer came running up behind them and the man said, ‘Come along, you two kids! Let’s get you down in the shelter!’

He reached out for Adele’s hand, and one of the women took Archie’s hand, and together they hurried across the road. A sign on one of the houses opposite said Public Shelter, with an arrow pointing to a flight of stone steps. People were still queuing up to go down them, and a bespectacled warden in a khaki uniform was standing by the railings directing them.

The explosions came nearer and nearer, and with each explosion the pavement shook as if it had been hit by a massive hammer.

Archie looked back at Adele as they started to jostle their way down the narrow steps. His face was white with fright.

‘We’re not going to die, are we?’

14

Jerry woke up with a jolt. He had been dreaming that he was back in Kathleen Hartley's parents' house, standing next to her bloody, mutilated body.

In his dream the room had been dimly lit, and he had been the only person in there. No Martian, no Molly Something, no other forensic investigators taking samples. Only him and Kathleen Hartley's body, with her gaping diagonal cuts.

He had been able to hear somebody whistling, some jaunty high-pitched tune, like 'Isn't This a Lovely Day To Be Caught in the Rain', and for a split second when he woke up he thought that the whistler was in his bedroom with him.

He reached over and switched on his bedside lamp. It was five past three in the morning and of course there was nobody else there. He sat up and tugged at his black Ramones T-shirt, which was damp with sweat. For a few moments, like an after-image in his mind's eye, he could still see the glistening herringbone pattern of Kathleen Hartley's wounds.

He drank half of the tepid water in the glass on his bedside table. It was very seldom that he dreamed about the cases he was working on. But then he thought: maybe there was a good reason I was dreaming about it. Maybe my brain's trying to nudge me into looking at these cases from another angle.

If these murderers are appearing from a different time, as well as a different world, maybe that's where we need to look for them. Not here, and not now. Not in the Met database, but in historical crime records. Maybe we should forget about trying to determine the murderers' possible motives or analysing the scanty forensic evidence they left behind them.

Maybe we need to be concentrating solely on the highly idiosyncratic ways in which they carried out their killings.

All right, we have two out-of-date cigarette butts and some fingerprints, and those could prove conclusive once we've identified the murderers. But first of all, we have to find out who they are. And maybe they've come out of the past, rather than the here and now.

Jerry got up and went through to his living room. He didn't have to worry how much noise he made. His new landlady's bedroom was right below his, but she was stone deaf and she slept wound up in her blankets like an Egyptian mummy. He had looked in on her once, to make sure that she was all right, because she had screamed for no reason in the middle of the night.

He would never be able to forget what had happened to his previous landlady, Nora, who had been horribly murdered, and if he had been able to find another flat as cheap as this one, he would have moved out. His new landlady was Nora's older half-sister Rachel, who was a sweet old thing but who could never remember if Jerry had paid his rent or not.

Jerry sat down at his small rickety desk and opened his laptop. He didn't know how far back in criminal history he needed to go in his search for a killer who might have butchered another victim in the same way as Kathleen Hartley. The Spanish Shawl cigarette butts dated from the 1940s, but possibly he would have to begin searching at an earlier date than that. All the same, he decided to start at 1950 and then scroll backwards through the decades.

He was prepared to accept that he could be wasting his time. All those witness reports had been so fantastic that what he was doing might be equally delusional. But those disembodied legs and that detached head and that half of a man – they must have come from somewhere, and if not now, then when? At least he would have satisfied himself that he had looked.

For the next three hours, while it gradually grew light outside, he went back through the online archives, reading through countless autopsy reports and coroners' records.

He found some extraordinary and chilling murders. A woman had been impaled naked on a fence post in a back garden in Wimbledon in the snowy midwinter in 1948, and she had taken three days to die. In 1936, a man had been dragged along behind a car from Putney to Sunbury-on-Thames, a distance of thirteen miles, and he had lost both arms on the way. Three-year-old twins had been crammed into a gas oven in 1931 and roasted by their vengeful father after his wife had left him for a photographer.

At half past six, Jerry stopped scrolling for a while, went into his kitchenette, and brewed himself a mug of instant coffee. Around this time, he usually fried himself a bacon sandwich or boiled a couple of eggs, but after what he had read so far about historical murders – especially the roasted twins – he had no appetite at all.

When he returned to his laptop, he came across a treatise on criminal cases called *Nunn's History of Homicide for Gratification*. It had been compiled in 1895 by an academic at the University of London called Jeremy Nunn, who was one of the pioneers in behavioural psychology. Nunn had listed dozens of murders in which the killers' principal motive had been the excitement and pleasure they derived from torturing or mutilating their victims, either when they were still alive or after they were dead.

Some of their gratification had been sexual, such as rape or necrophilia, but almost all of it came from exercising power over the people they were killing. Jerry let his coffee go cold while he read more and more of Nunn's descriptions of gratification murders and the men and women who had committed them.

And then he found this: 'Jasper Starke, who was employed at Billingsgate Market between 1877 and 1880, was arrested in 1880 under suspicion of having murdered five oyster-wives over a three-year period. Before his eventual capture he was known to the press and the City of London Police as "The Fishmonger". He was alleged to have raped each victim, and then used a filleting knife to cut their bodies in the way that he would have sliced up a salmon or other large fish in

preparation for grilling. According to the coroner, it appeared that he had done this in every case while they were still alive, before ending their lives by slitting their throats. It was never clear what pleasure he derived from this ritual. On the night of 18th November, 1880, before he could be interviewed by a doctor, he vanished from his cell in Bishopsgate police station, and was never seen again. His escape remains a mystery, since his cell was locked and the bars at the window remained intact.’

Underneath this entry was a sepia photograph of Jasper Starke – ‘The Fishmonger’. He was bald, with a bloated face, near-together eyes and a drooping walrus moustache. Apart from his moustache, Jerry thought that he bore more than a passing resemblance to Telly Savalas. He even had the same self-satisfied smirk as Telly Savalas, as if he was not at all worried that he had been arrested.

Jerry reread Jasper Starke’s entry twice and then sat back, staring at his mug shot. It was clear that whoever had raped, tortured and killed Kathleen Hartley had used exactly the same sadistic technique – exactly. But it couldn’t have been Jasper Starke himself, could it? Even though he had somehow escaped from custody, Jasper Starke would have been dead for well over a century by now, not even taking into consideration that the average lifespan for a man in those days was only forty-four years, even if he was lucky.

And yet – and yet. Who was the headless man that Shantelle had seen outside Kathleen Hartley’s house with her, on the night she was killed? *I swear to Jesus that he didn’t have a head.* Could that have been Jasper Starke, or some deranged admirer of Jasper Starke who had assumed his personality?

And apart from Kathleen Hartley, he and Jamila had all those other cases to consider. Every one of them was distinctly different, and yet they were all connected by the way in which only a part of their prime suspects had been seen by their witnesses.

Whose legs had the children at Brookwood School seen crossing the ceiling? And this had been less than half an hour before their teacher was found crushed to death by a type of

tram that hadn't run on London's streets since 1950, at the very latest.

How could a head with no body have appeared in Sabina's attic, and actually talked to her, shortly before she found her mother butchered in the kitchen? How could a man with no feet have entered Kenneth Treagus's hallway, and shot him?

How could half a man have blinded Yusuf? And how could Adele and Archie have carried Mrs Chibnall's shopping into a house that wasn't there, witnessed only by a man who had subsequently vanished?

After the dog walker with his Sealyham had disappeared, Jamila and Jerry had gone back and knocked on the doors of all the houses from which the residents might have noticed Adele and Archie walking up Salcott Road with Mrs Chibnall, or which might have had doorbell videos. None of the residents had seen them, and there were no video recordings. On top of that, none of them knew an elderly widow called 'Mrs Chibnall', nor had they ever come across a woman who might fit that description.

When he had first suggested that they might be looking for murderers from another time, Jerry had been only half serious. But after finding the Nunn entry about The Fishmonger, he was beginning to wonder if it might be the most logical explanation. He almost felt like quoting Sherlock Holmes to himself.

He couldn't take his eyes off the photograph of Jasper Starke, and Jasper Starke stared back at him from 1880 with that smug, brutal smile, as if he were challenging him to believe in a solution to Kathleen Hartley's killing that was so implausible it was almost insane.

Go on, Pardoe! If it wasn't me who did for her, mate, then who else could have done? I'm the only one who cuts up women like a twenty-pound cod.

Jerry could imagine going into DCI Chance's office and telling him that they were now looking for a suspect who had carried out five similar offences between 1877 and 1880. DCI

Chance would probably have him sectioned, or at least send him off to some quiet seaside resort on indefinite leave.

He checked the time. It was past eight thirty so he didn't feel bad about calling Jamila. All the same, her phone rang and rang before she eventually answered.

'What do you want, Jerry? I was taking a bath.'

'Can we get together for a coffee somewhere? I'd rather not meet you at the station because I don't want anyone earwigging.'

'Very well. How about some breakfast at the Social Pantry, if their food is not too sustainable for you?'

'Today, Sarge, I'm quite happy with a bit of zero waste. After what I've been looking through, I can tell you, I've got absolutely zero appetite.'

*

Jerry was already sitting at one of the Social Pantry's little pine tables when Jamila came in. She appeared to be flustered but he always found her more attractive when she was less self-contained and her hair was fluffed up. It made her seem less like his superior officer and more like an accessible woman.

She hung her shoulder bag on the back of her chair and sat down. 'My car refused to start so I came here by Tube, and some old man fell down the stairs at Clapham North. He was drunk – and I mean absolutely plastered – and at this time of the morning!'

The waitress came up and Jamila ordered chestnut mushroom on sourdough bread with zero-waste pesto. Jerry ordered a double espresso.

'You still have no appetite?' she asked Jerry.

'After what I've been reading about, I don't think I'm going to feel like eating anything at all for another week.'

He told her about Jasper Starke, and how the slices in Kathleen Hartley's body so closely resembled the cuts that

Starke had inflicted on the five oyster-wives that he had murdered.

Jamila looked thoughtful. 'I suppose it is possible that whoever killed Kathleen Hartley may have read about this Jasper Starke, and copied him. I myself have dealt with more than one case in which the perpetrator has imitated another offender.'

'Such as?'

'One man in Ilford last year had read about an American farmer who had strangled his wife and dropped her down a manhole. It was four years before the American woman's body was discovered. But in this case, in Ilford, a council worker noticed the smell and the wife's body was found after only three weeks.'

'But what about all these other cases?' said Jerry. 'Maybe if only two witnesses had come up with similar stories, it could have been nothing more than a coincidence. But *five*? And all within the space of three days? And that's not counting young Adele and Archie disappearing.'

The waitress brought Jamila's mushrooms, along with a glass of beetroot juice. As she started to cut into her sourdough toast, she said, 'Actually, Jerry, my mind has been working along much the same lines as yours. I was thinking again about that missing house in Salcott Road, and that triggered a memory about an investigation that I heard about two or three years ago.'

'In 1982, a baby girl of only six months old was kidnapped from her pram outside a shop in Stratford. The Met mounted, like, a massive search for her that went on for months, but she could not be found, and in the end the search was called off.'

She sipped her beetroot juice, and Jerry pulled a face and said, 'Yuck! I don't know how you can drink that stuff. I'd rather drink poodles' blood than that.'

'Well, it is interesting that you mentioned dogs. Because it was a police dog handler who I know who eventually found

this missing girl, and can you believe that was nearly forty years after she was kidnapped.’

‘You’re kidding me.’

‘No – PC Charlie Moss, the dog handler’s name is. He has a Labrador who was brought up as a puppy by a spiritual medium, and Charlie believes that this medium may have trained him to be sensitive to the presence of dead people, as well as the living.’

‘What, you mean, like, ghosts?’

‘More like spirits. The Labrador’s name is Ghost, and Charlie found that he was able to trace people who had gone missing long after everybody else had given up hope of finding them – sometimes decades afterwards. Sometimes long after they had passed away.’

‘He can seriously do that? For real?’

‘Yes. Charlie read an article in the local paper about the fortieth anniversary of the baby girl who had been kidnapped, and the article mentioned that her parents had kept the pram she had been snatched from. He went to see them and he persuaded them to let Ghost smell the pram’s mattress. Ghost went off and somehow tracked the scent to a house only about two miles away, in Forest Gate. By then, there was only an immigrant family living there, but Ghost sniffed around the house and then trotted off and led Charlie another two miles to the City of London Cemetery.’

‘How come this was never reported? What a story!’

‘It was never reported because nobody would have believed it, and the last thing the Met wanted was to appear as if they were making up fairy tales. But Ghost found a grave and refused to leave it until the remains that were buried in it were dug up. The grave was under a different name from the baby girl’s real name, but the coffin contained a woman’s body, and when it was tested for DNA, it was confirmed beyond any question that it was her.’

‘That’s amazing. But what are you suggesting? You think that Ghost might be able to sniff out these heads and legs and

half-people?’

‘I have no idea, Jerry. But perhaps he will be able to track down Adele and Archie, wherever they have gone to – or been taken to. And if we can discover what has happened to them, it might give us the key to understanding these other cases as well. I checked yesterday, and Charlie is still based at Lambeth, and Ghost is still fully active.’

‘Do you know what I think?’ said Jerry. ‘I think you and me, we’re as batty as each other. But why not let’s give Ghost a crack at it?’

‘Yes, I think we ought to,’ said Jamila. ‘I will suggest one thing, though, if we are going into such unknown territory, and that is that we should both be armed. You never know.’

‘But what if it’s ghosts we’re up against? Wouldn’t a bullet go right through them?’

Jamila let out an exasperated sigh. ‘One day, Jerry, you will amaze me and say something serious.’

*

They met the dog handler, Charlie Moss, at the kennels behind the Lambeth Road forensic laboratory. When they came around the main buildings they found him crouching down, brushing the coat of a chocolate-brown Labrador retriever.

‘Charlie Moss?’ asked Jerry, and he stood up. He was short and stocky, with a grey crewcut, and his dark blue uniform shirt gaped open to reveal a bulging belly. If Jerry had met him without knowing that he was a police dog handler, he would have guessed that he was a Northern club comedian.

‘DS Patel? DC Pardoe? Thanks for coming over. I must say I was right intrigued by your phone call.’

Jerry was amused by his accent. He not only looked like a Northern club comedian, but he actually sounded like one. He probably came from Barnsley, Jerry guessed, or Huddersfield.

‘This is Ghost, by the way. Say hello to the nice detectives, Ghost.’

Ghost approached Jamila first, his head cocked slightly to one side as if he were assessing her appearance and her heritage. Each step he took was very precise. He was a deep, dark brown, with a coat so glossy it looked like liquid chocolate. His eyes were green, and even Jerry knew that it was unusual for a Labrador to have green eyes.

Jamila tugged at Ghost's ears and Ghost licked her hand. Then he came over to Jerry, and sniffed at him, but didn't come close enough to be stroked.

'I don't think he's too keen on Lynx shower gel,' said Jerry.

'Oh, it's not that,' said Charlie. 'He senses a competitive male, that's all. I don't think it's ever occurred to him that he's a dog, and not a human.'

'Do you think he might be able to help us?' asked Jamila.

'What, to track down those two kids you were talking about? Believe me, if any dog can find them, Ghost can. They've totally disappeared, that's what you told me, didn't you, DS Patel? And the house where they were supposed to be going with this old woman, that's not there anymore?'

'That is correct. It was bombed during the war and never rebuilt. But we met a witness who said he saw the children being taken there. We are thinking that if it existed in the past, maybe Ghost could still pick up some kind of lingering scent.'

'We can but try,' said Charlie. 'He's not always consistent in what scents he can pick up. His piece of resistance was finding the grave of that Lily Matthews, that little girl who was kidnapped in 1982. But I'll give you an example of what he's capable of. Late last year, me and Ghost were called in because every night in a house off Clapham Common a woman was heard screaming by her next-door neighbours. I mean, screaming blue murder.

'Officers called at the house five times altogether but there was never any woman there. Her husband said that she'd walked out on him months ago and he had no idea where she was. Mrs Roe, her name was. But Ghost went sniffing into her

bedroom, and then he went out of the house and tracked her all the way across the common, didn't you, boy?'

Ghost looked up at Charlie with those intelligent green eyes, wagging his tail, as if he understood every word that Charlie was telling them.

'He stopped by the side of the Mount Pond and he wouldn't budge until we'd sent a diver down. The diver found Mrs Roe's body weighted down on the bottom of the pond. It turned out that her husband had found out she was having an affair, and he'd strangled her. Then he'd cut her stomach open with a pair of garden shears and stuffed bricks into her body before stitching her up again and dumping her body in the water.'

'But Ghost found her?'

'How he does it, don't ask me. But he was brought up as a puppy by this medium in Brighton, Stefan Vandobar his name was, and all I can guess is that every time Stefan Vandobar held a séance and some spirit showed up, Ghost was able to smell it. It's my belief that to him, spirits are equally as real as living people.'

'Let us hope that Adele and Archie are still real living people,' said Jamila. 'How soon would you and Ghost be ready to come looking for them?'

Charlie looked down at Ghost and Ghost looked back up at Charlie and even though Charlie said nothing, Ghost let out a sharp bark.

'He says, "Ready when you are",' said Charlie.

15

Edward came out of the workroom at the back of his jeweller's shop and was startled to see a woman standing in front of the display case, looking intently at the watches.

‘Madam? We’re closed.’

The woman continued to study the watches, as if she hadn't heard what he had said.

‘How much is this Patek Philippe?’ she asked him.

‘I’m sorry, madam, but we’re closed. Did you not see the sign on the door? And may I ask how you managed to get in here? I thought the door was locked.’

The woman turned to him at last. She was as tall as he was, with a long beige overcoat with high padded shoulders. Her hair was arranged in two large rolls and her face had an unhealthy pallor, as if she had spent her whole life indoors, with the curtains drawn.

‘Are you not going to tell me how much it is?’

Edward went over to the door and shook the handle. It was still firmly locked. Not only that, the alarm was switched on, so he couldn't imagine how this woman had entered the shop without setting it off.

‘How did you get in here?’ he repeated. ‘You weren't hiding behind the counter when I was locking up, were you?’

‘I want this watch,’ the woman insisted. ‘Are you not going to give it to me?’

‘I’m certainly not going to *give* it to you! And considering the way that you’ve compromised my security, I’m not going

to sell it to you either. Here – I'm going to take the alarm off and open the door and I must ask you to leave.'

'Did you not hear me? I want this watch. I am not going to go without it.'

'Madam, that is a Patek Philippe Nautilus and even though it is one of the less expensive models, it is still over twenty-three thousand pounds. I am not being derogatory, but I very much doubt if you could afford it.'

'I haven't the slightest intention of *paying* for it,' the woman replied, as if she found the idea completely risible. 'I simply wanted to know how much it was worth.'

'You had better get out of here now,' Edward told her. For some reason, he was beginning to find her presence quite unsettling. It was not only the fact that she had somehow entered the shop when the door was locked, it was her mocking demeanour, and her insistence that she was not going to go unless he gave her the watch. He had been robbed before, but only by local thugs in masks who had smashed the windows with bricks. If this was a robbery, it was low-key, and creepy, and he was not at all sure how to handle this woman. If he physically threw her out of the shop, might she sue him for assault?

He went to the door, switched off the alarm and unlocked it.

'Listen,' he said, 'unless you leave now, peacefully, I'm going to call the police.'

'You don't have to snap your cap! Give me the watch, and I will go.'

'The answer to that is no. I'm not going to give you the watch, or anything else.'

'In that case, I will have to take it.'

The woman made her way around the end of the counter, opened the back of the display case and reached inside. Edward immediately went after her, seizing her sleeve. Through the fabric of her coat, her arm felt as thin and rigid as a metal poker.

‘Let go of me!’ she spat at him, and twisted around to shake him off. At the same time, Edward suddenly felt his own jacket being tugged from behind, and then a burly arm was hooked around his throat, almost choking him, and he was pulled roughly backwards, up against a man’s chest.

He tried to turn around to see who had pulled him, but the arm was locked so tightly under his chin that he could scarcely breathe, let alone move his head. The man who was pressed up close behind him felt big and muscular, and the cuff of his coarse-knit sweater scratched Edward’s throat. He must have been unshaven, because Edward could feel his stubble prickling the back of his neck. He could feel his breath too, surprisingly cold, with a sour smell of alcohol and cigarettes.

Unable to speak, Edward could only look on helplessly while the woman took the Patek Philippe watch out of the display case, and three other watches too, all of them worth more than ten thousand pounds. She dropped them into the pocket of her coat, and then turned to Edward and pressed her hands together, giving a little curtsy as she did so, as if to say ‘thank you’.

The man released his hold on Edward’s throat, but instead gripped both of his arms at the elbows, so that he was still unable to move.

‘Who are you?’ Edward demanded, straining his head sideways in an effort to see what the man looked like. ‘How did you get in here?’

‘Been here all along, kidda,’ the man replied. He slurred his words, as if he had a cold.

‘Well, you’d better let go of me, my friend, because you’re in more trouble now than you can possibly imagine.’

Edward’s voice was shaky, but he was angry now, as well as frightened.

‘Go on,’ he said, ‘take those watches. But you’ll never be able to sell them, because every one of them is numbered and they’re all well known in the jewellery business. And if you look over there, by the door, you’ll see that this shop has

CCTV, and you two will have your ugly faces plastered all over social media before you know it.'

'Do you know something?' the man told him. 'I haven't a clue what the chuffing hell tha's talking about. And I don't chuffing care, neither.'

With that, he hooked one arm around Edward's neck again, compressing his Adam's apple so hard that Edward gagged. Edward could feel him fumbling behind his back for a moment, and then he felt the most agonising punch between his legs. Except that it was more than a punch. Something cold and sharp cut through his trousers and sliced his anus in half and then penetrated his rectum and even deeper into his bowels.

He couldn't scream because he couldn't inhale any air, but he let out a gurgle like a washbasin emptying out. He felt the cold, sharp object sliding back out of his insides, and then the man took his arm away from his throat, and he dropped onto his side on the floor.

'*Aah,*' was all he could manage to say. The pain between his legs was so intense that he didn't even want to put his hand down there to feel what the man had done to him. '*Aaah.*'

He couldn't see the man clearly, only in silhouette. But the man held up a ten-inch carving knife and waved it slowly from side to side in front of his face, and he saw the light reflected from that.

Then the man leaned over him, so close that Edward could feel his chilly rancid breath against his ear. 'They call me the Back Stabber,' he whispered. 'Now tha knows why.'

16

Jerry and Jamila drove to the Coopers' house on Northcote Road and Charlie Moss followed them in his dog unit van.

As soon as they rang the doorbell, Mr Cooper opened the door, with his distraught wife close behind him. 'Any news?' he asked them.

'Not yet, I am sorry to tell you,' said Jamila. 'However, we have brought with us a specialist police dog who has a remarkable record for finding missing persons. He has discovered many individuals long after everybody else has given up hope that they will ever be discovered.'

She turned around, so that Charlie could lead Ghost forward to the front doorstep.

'Here he is. His name is Ghost, but you must not let his name alarm you. It is only because he has a sense of smell that is almost – how can I put it? – almost supernatural.'

Ghost looked up at the Coopers with his ears flattened and his tail down, standing remarkably still, as if to show them that he was serious, and competent, and that they could trust him.

'This doesn't mean that you've called off the main search, does it?' asked Mr Cooper.

'No, not at all,' Jamila assured him. 'But we have had no reported sightings of Adele or Archie at all, anywhere within a five-mile radius. We have extended the radius now to ten miles, and we are also following all social media in case there is any indication of their whereabouts on Twitter or Instagram or Snapchat.'

'Do you think that somebody's taken them?' asked Mrs Cooper. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. 'I mean, if

somebody wants money to let them go, we'll pay anything, whatever they ask for.'

'We have no evidence that they were abducted, Mrs Cooper. As you already know, the last person to see them was a man walking his dog along Salcott Road, who witnessed them carrying an elderly woman's shopping for her. We have received no more witness reports after that, and no other communications of any kind. No ransom demands or anything like that.'

'Don't you have any idea what might have happened to them? You do believe they're still alive, don't you?'

'That is why we have brought Ghost here,' said Jamila. She didn't add that Ghost was equally good at tracking down the dead.

'If it's all right with you folks, Ghost'll take a sniff around the children's bedrooms,' Charlie put in. 'That'll give him a sensory picture of who he's looking for. Once he's visualised them, nothing else can put him off, I can tell you. Not rain, not mud, not even a flowerbed that's been dug up or a carpet that's been scrubbed. He won't be diverted by no other scent, I can tell you, not until he's found them.'

'Of course,' said Mr Cooper. 'Come on in. You'll have to excuse the mess. As you can imagine, we haven't been concentrating on anything else except for Adele and Archie.'

'You don't think they've come to any harm, do you?' said Mrs Cooper. 'Usually they're both so sensible. They always tell us where they're going, even if it's only down to the shops.'

'We are keeping an open mind,' said Jamila. 'Even sensible young people sometimes go off and do something completely out of character. We had a very serious little boy of only eight years old who took the train all the way to Scotland because he wanted to see the Loch Ness monster. He did not even have a ticket!'

Mr Cooper led them all upstairs to Adele and Archie's bedrooms. Ghost went into Adele's room first, sniffing at her

fluffy pink bedside rug and then at her neatly made bed, which was crowded with soft toys – rabbits and kittens and smiling rag dolls.

‘Can he take a sniff at her clothes, please?’ said Charlie.

Mrs Cooper opened the doors of her wardrobe and let Ghost deeply inhale the scent of her dresses and her jumpers and her underwear.

Jerry was fascinated by the thoughtful way in which Ghost nuzzled the hem of Adele’s skirts, one after the other, pausing every now and then as if he were not only forming a picture in his mind of what she must look like, but an idea of her personality too. All the time a large poster of Justin Bieber was grinning down at them from the opposite wall, and when Ghost had finished sniffing Adele’s clothes, he turned around for a moment and stared up at him too.

‘Don’t worry, boy,’ said Jerry. ‘You don’t have to go looking for him.’

They went across to Archie’s bedroom. The bed was still unmade, and the floor was littered with Lego and all the bits and pieces of a half-finished robot construction kit, as well as sweet wrappers and an empty pizza box.

‘He was on notice to tidy this all up,’ said Mr Cooper. ‘But somehow we didn’t have the heart to do it for him, not until we got him safely back home.’

Ghost was sniffing Archie’s duvet, which was all twisted up, as if Archie had been wrestling with it. Then Mrs Cooper opened up his clothes cupboard, and let Ghost breathe in the smell of his chaotic collection of tracksuits and T-shirts and rolled-up pyjamas.

At last Ghost gave a little sneeze, and then he looked up at Charlie as if to say, *Right, I’ve got everything I need.*

‘He’s done here now, thanks,’ Charlie told the Coopers. ‘We’ll be cracking on now, and see if he can pick up your kids’ scents outside.’

‘You have pictures of them, don’t you?’ asked Mrs Cooper. ‘Do you need any more? They had their photos taken at school

before they broke up.'

'No, thanks, really. The pictures we have already are fine.'

Ghost lolloped downstairs, and they all followed him.

'You'll keep us in touch, won't you?' said Mr Cooper. 'You know, even if—'

As they reached the front door, Jerry laid a hand on Mr Cooper's shoulder, and gave Mrs Cooper a reassuring nod. 'No news is good news, so far as we're concerned, and now you've got Ghost out looking for you, and he's the best of the best. As soon as we find Adele and Archie, you'll be the first to know. And I'm sure we will find them.'

*

Once they were out on Northcote Road, Ghost immediately started to tug at his lead and pull Charlie northwards, in the direction of Salcott Road.

'Whoa, he's picked up a right strong scent here,' said Charlie. 'If ever he's not quite certain of where he's going, he'll turn around to look at me now and then, as if to ask me if he's going the right way. But he hasn't done that once. He's dead set on going straight ahead.'

He wrapped Ghost's lead twice around his fist and kept a tight grip on it to stop Ghost from breaking into a run. Ghost was pulling so hard that he still had to walk at a double-quick pace to keep up with him. Jamila and Jerry did too, with Jamila giving occasional skips to keep up.

'Blimey,' Jerry panted. 'My doctor told me I should take more exercise, but he didn't tell me to overdo it.'

Ghost reached the corner of Salcott Road, and without any hesitation he began to lead them up towards the telegraph pole and the gap between the houses where number 79 used to stand. Once he reached it, he stopped beside the hedge and let out two sharp barks.

'So this is where the house was,' said Charlie. 'The one that was bombed?'

'That is correct,' said Jamila.

‘The kids were definitely here for a while,’ Charlie told her, and Ghost looked up at him as if to say, *yes, that’s right*.

‘But only for a while?’ asked Jamila.

Charlie peered over the hedge at the patio and the flowerpots. ‘Well, they’re not here now, are they? And that’s for sure.’

‘No, of course not,’ said Jamila. ‘But as I told you, I think we may be dealing with an extremely unusual situation here. People who are here somehow, but not visible, or only partially visible.’

‘I’ll take your word for it. Ghost’ll probably understand what you’re talking about, even if I don’t, seeing as how he was brung up on that kind of thing.’

As they talked, Ghost began to tug at his lead again, trying to pull Charlie back the way they had come.

‘See?’ said Charlie. ‘He’s told us that the kids *were* here, no doubt about that, but then they headed off again.’

Ghost led them all back to Northcote Road. When he reached the corner, he hesitated for a few moments, his head lifted, sniffing the air. He waited patiently until three cars and a bus had passed by, and then he led Charlie out into the middle of the road, sniffing at the tarmac as if he could smell something buried underneath it.

When he had snuffled around in a circle, he lifted his head, looking northwards, and let out another two barks.

‘He’s telling me they went this way,’ said Charlie, pointing up the road. ‘But they probably went by bus, or by car if somebody abducted them, or if somebody gave them a lift.’

‘How can he smell that?’ asked Jerry.

‘Don’t ask me, I’m not a dog. But he’s done it before. He once tracked a suspect who’d escaped from the scene of a violent assault by taking an Uber. Ghost was able to follow him all the way from Pasley Park to St Saviour’s.’

‘But you had to walk there?’

‘Of course. Just like we’ll have to walk now.’

‘Very well, then,’ said Jamila. ‘The sooner we get started, the better chance we have of finding those two children.’

They followed Ghost up towards Wandsworth Road, and then he turned north-east and led them towards Kennington, between long rows of terraced houses and shops, with the constant noise of traffic in their ears. He didn’t once look back at Charlie, but kept trotting forward with his head down, only stopping when he had to cross over a side road, where he would wait for the pedestrian lights to change, but still with a look of total concentration in those green eyes of his, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

After they had been following him for nearly forty minutes, Jerry said, ‘I bloody well hope this isn’t some kind of wild goose chase. I’m knackered.’

‘When we finally get to wherever Ghost is taking us, I promise you I will buy you a beer,’ said Jamila.

‘A beer? At this rate, I’ll probably need CPR.’

At last, after more than an hour of walking, Ghost led them to a short, wide road called St Oswald’s Place. On one side there was a block of flats with washing hanging on the balconies; on the other side a forbidding brick wall, with barred windows. Ghost took them almost to the end, to the back of a Victorian church. He stopped outside a black iron gate, which had a narrow yard behind it, lined with a row of five dustbins.

Ghost stood facing the gate for over half a minute, motionless, inhaling deeply, and holding each breath for seconds at a time, as if he were analysing every atom that had been left floating in the air. Jerry crouched down against the wall, watching him in fascination. It was obvious from his utter stillness that Ghost was picturing something in his mind, but Jerry couldn’t even begin to think what it was. He wondered if dogs see the world the same way we do. Or if they saw things that we are unable to see, just as they can smell things that we are unable to smell?

‘What is it, boy?’ Charlie asked him. Jerry had noticed that he might call Ghost ‘boy’, but he never tugged at his ears or patted him or spoke to him as if he were anything but another person. ‘Were they here, those two kids? Can you tell where they’ve gone to now?’

‘This is interesting,’ said Jamila, looking up at the eighty-foot wall that flanked the right-hand side of the yard. ‘The bricks on this side, they are completely different from the bricks on the front. They are a different colour, do you see, more orange, and they look as if they are much newer, because they are not blackened with so much soot. And if you look up, the roof does not slope downwards, it ends quite abruptly.’

‘What are you getting at?’ Jerry asked her.

‘I am wondering if there used to be a house standing here, like that house in Salcott Road, but it was bombed during the Blitz, or demolished at some time, and this yard replaced it.’

‘That’s a thought. We can check it with council records. But if that’s the case, that means that Adele and Archie went to two different houses that don’t exist anymore. Don’t even begin to ask me the implications of that.’

Charlie gave Ghost a couple of gentle tugs on his lead and said, ‘So, spooky boy? What now? If the kids aren’t here, where did they head off to next?’

Ghost barked again, and then turned around to look at all three of them, as if he were asking them if they still had the stamina to follow him even further. He had already made them walk more than three miles, after all.

*

Ghost led them back to Kennington Lane, and then a quarter of a mile along the road to a pub called The Wayfarer. He went straight to the pub’s front door, and waited there, with the same certainty that he had shown them outside the patio in Salcott Road and the yard in St Oswald’s Place.

‘They went into a boozier?’ said Jerry. ‘Mind you, I can’t say I blame them. But why did they? They wouldn’t have been served, would they, not on their own?’

‘Perhaps they were taken here by an adult,’ Jamila suggested.

‘Well, let’s go in and ask.’

They all went inside and up to the bar. A smiling young woman with enormous hoop earrings came up to them and said, ‘Yes, folks, what would you like? I’m afraid you’ll have to take your dog outside, into the garden, unless he’s a guide dog.’

‘Well, he is in a way, he’s a police dog,’ said Charlie. ‘And these two here are police officers.’

Jamila took out her ID. ‘Detective Sergeant Patel, and this is Detective Constable Pardoe. We are looking for two children, a girl of eleven years old and a boy of nine. Our dog has tracked them all the way from Wandsworth. Look, we have their pictures here. We are wondering if perhaps they might have come in here in the company of one or more adults.’

The young woman frowned at the photographs and then shook her head. ‘No, I haven’t seen them. When do you think they might have come in here?’

‘Yesterday, possibly, sometime in the afternoon or evening.’

‘No. But Don was on yesterday. He’s serving in the other bar at the moment. I’ll go and ask him.’

She took the photographs into the saloon bar, but came back almost immediately, shaking her head again. ‘Don hasn’t seen them either. In fact, he says we haven’t had any children in at all, not since the weekend.’

Now, though, Ghost was sniffing the air again, his head lifted and his ears flattened, and he suddenly pulled Charlie towards the pub’s front door.

‘Hallo,’ said Jerry. ‘It looks like we’re off again.’

‘Thank you for your help anyway,’ Jamila told the young woman behind the bar. She took back the photographs of Adele and Archie and followed Charlie and Jerry outside, onto Kennington Lane.

‘Now what?’ asked Jerry.

Ghost was waiting at the kerb, but staring directly across the road. ‘They must have come out of the pub and gone thataway,’ said Charlie. ‘But look at him. He’s quivering. He only does that when he gets really close to the people he’s tracking. I reckon we’re not too far from finding them.’

They all crossed the road and Ghost went up to the front of a three-storey house directly opposite, with stone steps leading down to a basement area. On the front wall of the house, Jerry could just make out a faded arrow pointing downwards, and the lettering *ublic Shelter*.

Ghost poked his nose through the railings in front of the steps, and started to make a thin, whining sound in the back of his throat. He continued to quiver, and now he started to tramp his front paws impatiently on the pavement, as if he were marching on the spot.

‘I’ll bet you money they’re down there, those two kids,’ said Charlie.

Jerry went up the front steps of the house and pressed the doorbell. After a long wait, an elderly man with wild white hair and wonky spectacles and a drooping knitted waistcoat opened the door.

‘No, thank you,’ he said, and was about to close the door again when Jerry said, ‘We’re not selling anything, mate. We’re police.’

‘Police? What for? I haven’t called you. Not unless I did it by mistake.’

‘We need access to your basement, sir,’ said Jamila. ‘We have reason to believe that two missing persons may be down there.’

‘I’m not aware that there’s anybody down there,’ the elderly man told her. ‘We use it only for storage. Books, furniture, that sort of thing.’

‘All the same, sir, I am asking you if you would allow us to take a look inside. I do not want to have to go to all the trouble of obtaining a warrant.’

The elderly man puffed out his cheeks as if this were all an intolerable nuisance. But then he said, ‘Very well. Let me go and find the keys.’

After a long wait, during which Ghost continued to whine and quiver and march with his two front paws, the elderly man returned. He unlocked the railings and went down the steps to unlock the basement door.

‘There you are,’ he said, waving his hand. ‘Help yourselves. The light switch is on the left.’

Ghost scrambled down the steps and into the basement, and even before Charlie had switched on the lights he was furiously sniffing around. Both sides of the basement were crowded with furniture – dining chairs and sofas and china cabinets and standard lamps, as well as boxes filled with books. But even though Ghost was so excited, with his tail flapping from side to side, there was no sign of Adele and Archie.

Jamila and Jerry circled slowly around the basement, peering into each shadowy corner and into every box of books. They even lifted out some books to make sure that the children had not been murdered and their bodies hidden underneath all the leather-bound copies of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Shakespeare plays and Conan Doyle novels.

After that, they climbed over more boxes and went to the very back of the basement, where two bow-fronted bureaus were stacked one on top of the other. They opened every drawer in both of them, in case the children had been dismembered and their body parts concealed inside. Both Jamila and Jerry had seen the attempted disposal of human remains that were far worse, especially after the murders of babies and young children. Jerry had once attended a scene in Streatham where a seven-year-old girl had been chopped into more than twenty pieces with a chainsaw.

‘*Adele!*’ Jamila called out. ‘*Archie! Can you hear me?*’

They stopped, and listened, but apart from Ghost’s panting and the pattering of his paws on the concrete floor, there was silence.

‘Why does he seem so sure that they’re down here?’ Jerry asked Charlie. ‘I mean, they’re not, are they?’

Charlie looked at Ghost, still frantically trotting from one side of the basement to the other, and he pulled a real Northern comedian’s face. ‘I couldn’t tell you, pal. What goes on inside that dog’s head, it’s a mystery most of the time, except when he’s hungry, or thirsty, or he needs to go for a shit.’

‘So what do you suggest we do now?’ asked Jamila. ‘The children are obviously not to be found here, even if they might have been here at some time before. Do you think that Ghost will now lead us on to somewhere else?’

‘It don’t seem like it. Let’s just give him a bit more time. He’s found *something* here, no doubt about that. And it must be connected to those two kids. Like I said before, once he gets locked on to a scent, he won’t be distracted till he’s found it.’

They waited patiently while Ghost continued to zigzag around the floor. Jerry thought that he looked determined rather than bewildered, and he was interested that he ignored the furniture and the boxes of books, but sniffed only at the air in the middle of the basement, as if he could sense that there was something there, but couldn’t quite work out what it was.

More than five minutes went by, and at last Jamila looked at her watch and said, ‘Whatever he can smell, it is not Adele or Archie, is it? Perhaps they were held here for quite a long time, and that is what is confusing him.’

Charlie shrugged. ‘I’ve never known him act like this before, I must say. Ghost! Ghost! What’s up, fella? What can you smell?’

Ghost took no notice of him, but let out a single snappy bark and jumped back as if he had been kicked. Then he bared his teeth and leaned forward and began to pull something out of the air. Jamila and Jerry and Charlie stared in astonishment as a pink sleeve appeared out of nowhere, and then a curled-up hand.

‘God almighty,’ said Charlie. ‘He’s only found someone.’

Ghost backed slowly across the floor, his teeth still gripping the sleeve, and then the rest of an arm appeared, and a shoulder, and a tangle of blonde hair, and as if she had stepped out of a mirror, like *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, Adele appeared, and stepped blinking into the bright unshaded light.

Ghost released his grip on her sleeve, and let out another bark, and stood back with his tail wagging, clearly delighted with what he had done. Adele turned around and around, so shocked she was unable to speak.

Jamila went forward and took hold of her hands and squeezed them tight. ‘Adele?’ she said. ‘Adele Cooper? We’re police officers, and this is a police dog. We have been looking for you – both you and your brother.’

Adele stared at her, her eyes brimming with tears and her lower lip trembling. At last she managed to say, ‘Have you found Archie too? Where is this?’

She looked at the boxes and the stacked-up furniture and then she said, ‘This is the same place! This is the same place! This is the bomb shelter! I’m sure it’s the same place! There was a bombing raid, and we were all hiding down here! What year is this?’

Jerry told her, and she dropped her head down in relief.

‘Why, love? What year did you think it was?’

‘Nineteen forty-one. Somehow, me and Archie found ourselves in 1941! Don’t ask me how. But where is Archie? Can you get him back too? You must get Archie back!’

Charlie said, ‘Here, take a look at Ghost. He hasn’t given up yet.’

‘Ghost?’

‘That’s my dog’s name, love. If anybody can bring your brother back, he can.’

Ghost was standing in the middle of the basement now, his head lifted, his legs rigid. He was inhaling deeply again, holding each breath for at least ten seconds. Jamila put her arm around Adele’s shoulders to comfort her as they watched

Ghost trying to locate Archie. He was here in the basement, only a few feet away from them in distance, but more than eighty years away from them in time.

Ghost made a whining sound, and then he stepped forward and his head disappeared. He took a few more steps forward, and he disappeared up to his waist, and then his tail, and then he was gone altogether.

‘Jesus,’ said Jerry. ‘Did I just see what I thought I saw?’

‘He’s gone looking for her brother, that’s what he’s doing,’ said Charlie, although he sounded equally shaken. Adele was staring at the place where Ghost had been before he had vanished, her mouth open, too astonished by what was happening even to cry.

More minutes passed. They stood in silence, waiting for Ghost to reappear. Jerry could hear the traffic in Kennington Lane outside, but at the same time he thought he could faintly hear the crump of distant explosions. Maybe it was thunder, but it sounded more like bombs.

‘I hope he hasn’t gone for good,’ he told Charlie. ‘I’m not usually a dog-lover, but that Ghost, he’s one in a million, isn’t he? I’m really beginning to warm to him.’

More than ten minutes went by. Charlie cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, ‘Ghost! Ghost! Here, fella! Here, boy! Come on, Ghost!’

Almost at once, Ghost came jumping out of nowhere, his claws skidding on the floor. He trotted up to Charlie, and although he couldn’t speak, Charlie could tell what he was trying to say by the way he lifted one paw and by the mournful expression in his eyes.

‘He’s gone,’ said Charlie. ‘I’m afraid your brother’s gone.’

‘You don’t mean *dead*?’ asked Adele.

‘Oh no, love, sorry! I didn’t mean that! But maybe somebody saw you disappear and took him away so that he couldn’t follow you.’

‘What do we do now?’ asked Jamila. ‘Will Ghost be able to find out where Archie has been taken, if that is what has happened to him?’

Charlie looked down at Ghost and shook his head. ‘He looks right stumped at the moment. For one reason or another, I reckon he’s lost the scent. What we need to do is take this young lady home and at the same time we can give Ghost a chance to refresh his olfactory picture of Archie, if you follow what I mean. It’s right possible that *her* scent kind of overrid his.’

‘But did he really go back to 1941?’ asked Jerry.

‘That’s a discussion I’m going to leave till later,’ said Charlie. ‘As of now, I’m going to take each stage of this case as it comes, and not start asking questions I probably won’t be able to understand the answers to, even if I do get answers.’

‘What about Archie?’ sobbed Adele.

‘We will go on looking for him,’ Jamila told her. ‘We found you, after all, and we will do everything we can to find him too, I promise. Let us first take you back to your mother and father. You have no idea how relieved they will be that you are safe.’

Jerry exchanged glances with Charlie, and Charlie raised an eyebrow. Neither of them needed to say that in this investigation, it was impossible to make promises.

17

Jerry called Edge to come over from Lavender Hill and pick them up, and Charlie called for one of his team to bring a dog van from Lambeth Road.

They went back across the road and waited on the seats outside The Wayfarer. While they were waiting, Jamila quietly questioned Adele about what had happened to her and Archie from the moment they had last been seen with Mrs Chibnall.

Adele was still tearful and distressed, but she was consoled by Ghost, who sat close beside her, looking up at her with almost human sympathy, and Jerry brought her some paper napkins out of the pub so that she could wipe her eyes.

Although she was so upset, she wanted to tell Jamila and Jerry how she and Archie had found themselves in wartime London. She explained how they had gone back home after leaving Mrs Chibnall's house, only to find that their own house had been bombed, and that trams were running along Northcote Road.

Jerry looked at Jamila and said, '*Trams?*' and he didn't have to tell her that he was thinking of Mary Jonas, especially since trams from 1941 would have had the same gauge as the deep ruts on Mary Jonas's body.

Adele said, 'Mrs Chibnall told us to take a tram so that we could go and see this man called Scratch. She said that Scratch could help us to get back to our own year.'

'Scratch?' Jamila asked her. 'That is a strange name. Where did you find him?'

'Number 9, St Oswald's Place,' said Adele. 'It's not far from here, just up the road and round the corner.'

‘Yes, we have been there. Ghost led us there, so we know where it is.’

Adele described how Veronica had let them into number 9 – ‘she was tall, with funny rolled-up hair’ – and how she had arranged for them to go down to the cellar to meet Scratch.

‘Scratch said he could send us back to the year we had come from, but he said we had to go out stealing for him first. I suppose as a way of paying him.’

Then she told them how Tommy and Nigel had turned up, and how she and Alfie had been sent to The Wayfarer with them to divert the customers’ attention while the two boys pickpocketed their wallets and lifted their purses.

‘Can you describe this Scratch?’

Adele blew her nose and shook her head. ‘It was much too dark in that cellar. All we could see was these two orange eyes, and then only for a second. And there was a horrible smell too. I don’t know if it was him. But it was like a raw chicken that’s gone bad.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Jerry. ‘It sounds like a fairy story. Like that troll under the bridge, who wanted goats for his supper. That kind of thing.’

‘Tommy told us that Scratch had eleven other children in his gang and four or five men. He calls them Scratch’s Army.’

‘He had grown-ups stealing things for him too?’

‘Yes, and Tommy said that if any of the children tried to run away or tell the police about him, one of the men would come and kill them, and really horribly too.’

‘Sounds a right charmer, this Scratch, doesn’t he?’ said Charlie.

Adele looked down at Ghost and fondled his ears. ‘Tommy said that one of the men was called Ronnie, and another one was called Starkey. He said that Starkey always smelled like fish.’

Jerry caught Jamila’s eye again. ‘Starkey? And he smelled like fish?’

Adele nodded. ‘We *will* be able to rescue Archie, though, won’t we?’

‘Yes,’ said Jamila emphatically. ‘Look – here comes our lift. We will take you home first and we will let Ghost pick up Archie’s scent again. Then we will go looking for him straight away. We will not stop looking until we have found him, whatever year he is in.’

*

As he drove them back to Northcote Road, Edge beckoned Jerry to lean over from the back seat of the car so that it would be difficult for Adele to hear what he was saying.

‘We’ve had another AOABH.¹ Bloke called Edward Dance, who owns Dance’s the Jeweller’s on Balham High Road. He was stabbed in the jacksy with a carving knife. Almost killed him, but he’s in Guy’s now and the doctors reckon he’s going to recover.’

‘What was the motive? Theft, I presume,’ said Jamila.

‘That’s right. There was two perps, a male and a female, and they took over forty thousand quid’s worth of watches.’

‘So what’s that got to do with me and DS Patel?’ Jerry asked him. ‘We’re right in the middle of chasing after these geezers who aren’t there, or not *all* there, anyhow. We just rescued this poor girl right out of thin air, and we’re still looking for her brother.’

‘The reason I’m telling you about it is because I was able to question Dance for a few minutes before he went into surgery. He told me that the woman appeared in his shop even though the front door was locked and the alarm was switched on. For the life of him, he couldn’t work out how she had managed to get in there.’

‘What about the male?’

‘Before he appeared, Dance had unlocked the door and turned off the alarm and told the female to sling her hook. But he still had no idea how this bloke got in either, because he didn’t hear the doorbell jangle and he didn’t hear him coming

up behind him – not until he'd grabbed him by the throat and practically throttled him.'

'Did this Dance fellow give you descriptions?' asked Jamila.

'Well, this is what makes this whole investigation even more up your street. The shop has CCTV but neither the woman nor the bloke who stabbed him actually appear on it. Dance does, and his name's rather appropriate because it looks like he's dancing.'

'That is weird. But he saw them himself – or says he saw them.'

'I'm pretty sure he's telling the truth. There's no way you could stab yourself up the arse like that, even if you wanted to. But he never saw the bloke who stabbed him. All he could say was that he was wearing some kind of bobbly sweater. But here's the interesting thing. He said the woman looked like she'd stepped right out of a 1940s film. You know, like Greta Garbo or Jane Russell or what's-her-name, Rita Hayworth. Her dress and her hairstyle, he said you'd never see a woman these days looking like that. He promised to do me a sketch of her when he came out of surgery.'

'Nineteen-forties?' said Jamila. 'Yes, Edge, you were right to tell us. I think we need to go to Guy's and have a talk with him ourselves.'

She turned around to Adele, who was staring out of the car window as if she were making sure that they stayed in the present day, and that no trams were passing by, and no barrage balloons were floating up in the sky.

'Adele – once we have taken you back home, we will give you some time to settle down. But if it is possible, we would like to come around later and take a longer statement from you. There might be some tiny detail you have not yet told us about that will help us to find your brother and bring him back.'

'You said that Ghost would find him.'

‘And I am sure that he will. But Ghost will not be able to arrest this Scratch person or this Veronica that you were telling us about.’

Jerry sat back and gave Adele a smile. He decided not to ask Jamila how she expected them to be able to arrest anybody from 1941 – or even if they could, what the magistrates would say when they brought them up in front of the court.

*

Both Mr and Mrs Cooper burst into tears when they opened their front door and saw Adele standing there. They were even more distraught when Jamila told them that Archie was still missing, and that they would have to set up a fresh search for him.

Only a few minutes later, Charlie arrived in his dog van with Ghost.

‘You don’t mind if he has another sniff around your lad’s bedroom?’

‘Of course not,’ said Mr Cooper. ‘Please – help yourself.’ Then he turned round to Jamila and Jerry. ‘Where did you find her? She hasn’t been molested at all, has she? Nobody’s taken advantage?’

‘No, she has not been touched in that way, Mr Cooper,’ said Jamila. ‘But it is not easy to explain where we rescued her from. She will probably explain to you herself what happened to her and to Archie. I can almost guarantee that you will find it very hard to believe what she tells you, but you can take my word for it that it is the truth – at least as she sees it. We have much more investigation still to carry out, but let me simply say that it was not so much *where* we rescued her from, but *when*.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand. What do you mean – *when*?’

‘We will return in a few hours’ time, and we will be able to explain more fully to you then. Meanwhile, Adele is in need of nothing more than comforting, and reassurance that we are doing everything possible to find her brother.’

Ghost came down the stairs with his rose-coloured tongue hanging out, pulling Charlie behind him. He was panting to go out of the front door and start looking for Archie.

Jerry looked into the living room and he could see Mrs Cooper hugging Adele on the sofa. In all his years as a detective, he had never felt so frustrated, so unable to understand who or what he was actually supposed to be investigating. Normally he was able to assure the victims of burglary or assaults that he would bring the buggers to justice, and at least thirty per cent of the time, he had been able to. But now he had no idea who the buggers were, or if they were working together, or even if they knew each other, or what they were after, either individually or as a gang. Even more frustrating than that, he had no idea if they really existed, or if they were only some kind of weird malevolent mirage. *Ghosts*, if that's what ghosts actually were.

As he opened the front door for them, Mr Cooper gave him and Jamila a thumbs up, because he was too overcome with emotion to speak. But when Ghost reached the front garden gate, he looked back at Mr Cooper as if to say, *Don't worry, I have Archie's scent strongly now, I'll find him for you.*

*

Once he was out on the pavement, Ghost began to pull Charlie northwards again, in the same direction he had before.

'I reckon he's leading us back to St Oswald's Place,' said Charlie. 'I suggest we save ourselves some time and drive up there. We can make a start looking for Archie from number 9. If that's where this Scratch person hangs out, it's very likely that he was taken back there when we rescued Adele.'

'I agree with you,' said Jamila. 'In any case, we need to find Scratch and put a stop to all this criminal activity that he appears to have been organising. Sending these children out to pick pockets for him, he sounds like Fagin.'

'Right, then, let's get on it,' said Jerry. 'We'll meet you up there.'

‘I’ll go back and see if the Martian’s made any progress with the Dance job,’ Edge told them. ‘Maybe he’s found that there’s a way of getting into the jeweller’s without a key, and there was nothing spooky about it at all. If that’s the case, you two ghostbusters won’t need to worry about it anymore.’

Jamila and Jerry returned to their car where they had left it parked around the corner in Bramfield Road, while Ghost jumped into the back of Charlie’s dog van.

‘I know I’ve been trying to sound optimistic,’ said Jamila, as they started off. ‘But I wonder if we really have the slightest chance of finding young Archie.’

‘I’m not thinking like that,’ Jerry replied. ‘This investigation is so effing complicated that I’m taking it one surprise at a time, and not trying to make any sense of it. We saw a dog pull a girl out of thin air, and then the dog itself vanished into thin air, and then came back again. And the girl said she and her brother had found themselves for no apparent reason in 1941. If you can think of any explanation for any of that, then I would take my hat off to you, if I was wearing one.’

The traffic was slow, but after twenty minutes they drew up in St Oswald’s Place. Charlie parked his van out of sight around the corner, because it had Dog Section written on the sides and Police Dogs written on the back doors.

They approached the black iron gate of number 9. There was no doubt that Charlie had made the right decision about coming here, because Ghost went up to the gate and stood there with his nose between the bars, quivering in the same way that he had done when they had been close to finding Adele.

‘He’s convinced that he’s here,’ said Charlie. ‘But I don’t see how he *can* be here, unless he’s in one of those dustbins.’

‘Well, we can soon find out,’ said Jerry. He took his folding lock-picking tool out of his pocket and selected one of the picks. The gate was fastened with the simplest of rim locks and after under fifteen seconds of jiggling, he had swung it open.

They lifted the lids of all five dustbins but they were filled only with church rubbish like melted-down candles and crumpled magazines, as well as Burger King boxes. Ghost, though, was sniffing at the brick paving, in the same way he had sniffed at the road and detected the tram lines that had once run along there, more than eighty years before.

‘He’s picked up something down there,’ said Charlie. ‘Didn’t Adele say that Scratch was in a cellar? Maybe that’s where the cellar used to be, right here underneath our feet. Maybe it’s still there.’

‘It could be,’ said Jamila. ‘But even if it is, how could we gain access to it? It looks as if it is all bricked up. And even if Scratch is still inside it, how could he have survived? If this part of the building was bombed, surely he would have been killed, or buried alive.’

‘It could be that we could gain entry from the church cellars,’ Jerry suggested. ‘Or maybe the premises next door. I’ll go and ask the vicar if he knows a way in. Believe me – it’s not often in your life you get to say that.’

He went round the corner to St Peter’s Church. He was gone only for a few minutes before he came back, shaking his head.

‘There must have been a cellar there once. But when the house was bombed and then demolished, it was completely filled up with rubble.’

Jamila looked down at Ghost, who still had his snout pressed to the bricks and was inhaling deeply.

‘We could get a court order and have this paving all dug up. But you can tell that it has not been disturbed recently, if not for years. So what is it that Ghost can smell?’

Charlie watched Ghost for a while, and then he said, ‘It’s the memory of what happened here. That’s what he can smell. But it’s not like that basement, where he was able to go back into the past. If this is solid rubble, there’s absolutely no way.’

‘In that case, before we start digging, let us go back and try to discover what *did* happen here. Perhaps that will give us some idea of where to go looking for Archie today. Or perhaps

Archie is here, and this is where he will have to stay buried,
for the rest of time.’

¹ Assault Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm

18

‘Come on, boy!’ said Charlie. ‘You might be able to smell something, but there’s bugger-all there, and you know it!’

It took several minutes of cajoling and yanking at his lead, but at last Charlie persuaded a reluctant Ghost to give up sniffing the bricks. Even though Ghost whined at him, it was apparent that he too realised that their search for Archie had reached a dead end, and that they would have to call it off – for now, anyway.

‘DS Patel – Jerry – God only knows what you’re going to do now. But if you need me and Ghost again, give us a bell later.’

Charlie led Ghost back to his van and opened up the doors so that Ghost could scramble inside. Then he gave Jamila and Jerry a toot on his horn and headed off back to Lambeth Road. Jamila and Jerry drove to Lavender Hill police station, and on the way there, neither of them spoke. They were both thinking about number 9, and what Ghost could possibly have been smelling there – a scent from today, or from days that were long gone by.

As they hung up their coats, DCI Chance put his head around their office door. ‘Edge tells me you found the girl. Good show. Any luck with the boy yet?’

‘Not so far, guv,’ said Jerry. ‘It’s one of those cases that you might call a pig’s dinner, with added ketchup.’

‘I see. But you will keep me up to date, won’t you? The bloody media have been pestering me every five minutes.’

Once he had gone, Jamila sat down and switched on her computer. ‘What we need to do now is find out anything we

possibly can about 9 St Oswald's Place. We also need to get ourselves up to date on how all those other inquiries are coming along. It's possible that one of them might throw some light on where Archie has gone.'

'It's this whole *time* thing that's really throwing me,' said Jerry. 'It looked like Ghost pulled Adele out of nowhere, but was she really in 1941?'

'Wherever she was, she was not in the present day. And the way she described everything, it certainly sounded as if it could have been 1941. The barrage balloons and the bomb shelter.'

'But then there's what she said about the grown-up men that this Scratch is supposed to have working for him. Starkey, who smells of fish? That sounds so much like Jasper Starke, the Fishmonger. Yet Starke disappeared in the year 1880 for Christ's sake.'

Jamila called DI Simon Fairbrother and asked him for news on the other cases that he and his team were working on.

'Sorry,' he said. 'We're making no headway at all, not with any of them.'

They had still been unable to identify the man who had shot Kenneth Treagus, or establish any kind of motive for shooting him. Neither had they made any progress with the murders of Kathleen Hartley or Mary Jonas or Lilian Ferris, or the blinding of Yusuf Nadeem.

'I must admit I've never known anything like it,' Simon Fairbrother told her. 'In some of the cases there seems to be some forensic evidence, footprints and so on, but it doesn't relate to anything. And in most of them there's hardly any, or none at all. It's like we're chasing a whole gang of ghosts.'

Jerry went to the canteen to fetch a cup of lemon tea for Jamila and a milky coffee for himself, and then they both started to search for any mention anywhere of number 9 St Oswald's Place. For an hour, their office was silent, except for the tip-tapping of Jamila's fingernails on her keyboard, and the

sound of an officer monotonously whistling ‘Yesterday’, further down the corridor.

Jamila checked through the records of Wandsworth Council. During a bombing raid on the night of 14 October 1941, there had been a direct hit on number 9 St Oswald’s Place and the building had been almost completely demolished.

For his part, Jerry came across a street map of Kennington from 1837. It clearly showed number 9 as the last in the long line of buildings that now backed on to St Peter’s Church. In 1837, though, St Peter’s Church had yet to be built, and St Oswald’s Place had yet to be named. It was still a field, part of Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, and the buildings were called Waterloo House.

He looked up Waterloo House, and found out that up until 1860 it had contained a factory for making military uniforms, and the Harris Art School, as well as some estate agent’s offices and rented storage space. But he was surprised by a long footnote that said that Charles Dickens had made a reference to Waterloo House in one of his few surviving diaries.

According to this footnote, Dickens had always destroyed his diaries at the end of the year, because he was almost fanatically secretive about his personal life. But one diary had gone astray in 1867, when he was visiting New York, and which contained details of his illicit affair with Nelly Ternan, and he had lost another diary in 1843 when he was almost bankrupt.

Apparently, it was the diary of 1843 that contained the reference to Waterloo House. There was an introduction by an Oxford historian called P. J. Wallace, and this was followed by a transcript of three relevant pages from the diary itself, since Dickens’s handwriting was almost illegible. Jerry quickly scrolled through the first of these pages, because it began with multiple references to train times to Slough and appointments with his publishers at Forster’s restaurant. Then, however, he started to read a paragraph that stopped him scrolling, and he scrolled back and read it more slowly.

‘Sarge,’ he said to Jamila. ‘Come and have a butcher’s at this.’

Jamila wheeled her chair over to sit beside him. ‘So – what have you found?’

‘Charles Dickens’s diary, 1843. It says here that his new novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, was still being serialised but it was turning out to be a flop. His publishers had told him that sales were so bad they were going to cut his royalty payments by fifty quid a month. The trouble was, his missus was ready to pop with sprog number five, and he was worried that he was going broke.’

Jamila frowned at Jerry’s PC screen. ‘So what am I reading here?’

‘Dickens’s diary. He says here, look, “My most successful novel, financially, had been my second, *Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy’s Progress*, both when it was serialised in *Bentley’s Miscellany* and when it was published in book form. I had been inspired to write *Oliver Twist* by the stories I had been told by impoverished street children in Kennington. They had informed me of an elderly villain who ran a veritable stable of young thieves, sending them out daily to steal wallets and handkerchiefs and also to burgle houses. It was from their accounts that I created the character of Fagin.

“Some have suggested that I based Fagin on a so-called ‘kidsman’ called Ikey Solomon, who gave young children food and shelter in exchange for pickpocketing. I did not deny this, but I knew the real Fagin to be very different. Searching for inspiration for a new tale that would revive my fortunes, I scoured the streets of Kennington to find him. I walked more than twenty miles and during my walks I met and questioned dozens of urchins. At last a ragged young girl told me of his whereabouts, number 9 Waterloo House, adjacent to Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens.

“I called on that address, and I informed this kidsman’s housekeeper who I was and why I wished to speak with him. She told me that because of a sensitivity to light, he resided in utter darkness, in his cellar, and would talk to me nowhere

else. Not only that, he would not answer any questions that I might have for him unless I were to guarantee him a proportion of the profits from the book that I would be writing about him. I agreed to that.

““What I learned from him that afternoon was both shocking and extraordinary. He was indeed a kidsman, such as my character Fagin had been; but he was much more than that. He was a thief not only of property but of time itself. Although the cellar was as black as night, and I was unable to see him, he spent more than three hours talking to me. He described how the years of our lives are like the pages of a book, one on top of the other, and that we can turn those pages back or forward whenever we wish. You wish to relive your childhood? Go back to chapter one. You wish to discover how your life will end? All you have to do is turn to the very last page.

““He told me that I could freely base my story on what he had told me. However, if I gave the police or the authorities the slightest suggestion of who he was or his location, one of his ‘army’ would find me and murder me, and that my viscera would be found draped from a lamp-post on London Bridge.

““That is why, when I wrote *A Christmas Carol*, the miserly character is called Scrooge, and not Scratch, which is the kidsman’s real name. When I was pressed by the correspondent from *The Times* to reveal the origin of the name Scrooge, I made out that I had seen the name Ebenezer Scroggie on a gravestone in the Canongate Churchyard in Edinburgh.

““But Scratch is the master of yesterday; and of now; and of the future, and it is from Scratch’s dark cellar that the ghosts of my story have arisen. The ghosts of Christmas Past and Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come were all conceived in the Stygian cellar at number 9 Waterloo House, by its mysterious and powerful occupant, and his real name is Scratch. I hinted at it, not only in Scrooge, but in the character of Bob Cratchit, but that was the closest to the wind that I dared to sail.””

Jamila sat back. ‘This is amazing. Why is this not more widely known? You would think that this would be included in

every biography of Charles Dickens ever written!’

‘But look,’ said Jerry. ‘At the end of it, this Wallace bloke says that almost all literary scholars believe that this is nothing but another hoax by Dickens to explain where the name Scrooge came from. They reckon it’s another load of old cobblers, like his story about “Ebenezer Scroggie”. There’s no gravestone in Canongate Churchyard with the name Scroggie on it, and no record that anybody of that name was ever buried there. They think that Dickens was simply taking the piss, and that’s why it’s hardly ever mentioned. If ever.’

‘But you and I, we have corroboration for this story,’ said Jamila. ‘Adele told us that there was a man called Scratch, living in a blacked-out cellar at number 9. And she had no reason to invent such a character, even if she knew what Charles Dickens had written in his diary, which is highly unlikely. Maybe Scratch is not there now. But he might have been there in 1941, when that building was still standing, and maybe in 1843 too, when Charles Dickens went out looking for it.’

‘Exactly,’ said Jerry. ‘And what if he really *can* turn time forward, or back, like the pages of a book? Is that where these killers have been coming from? Scratch’s cellar?’

‘Oh my God,’ said Jamila, covering her face with her hands. ‘This is making my brain hurt!’

*

They went down to the canteen to have a late lunch and to talk over what Charles Dickens had written in his diary about Scratch.

They agreed that they were not yet ready to share what they had learned with DCI Chance or the rest of the team because they doubted if they would be taken seriously.

DI Baker had already expressed the opinion that when Sabina Ferris had seen the detached head in her attic, she could have been suffering from some ‘hormonal hallucination’, brought on by puberty. ‘I know all about women’s hormones, I can tell you. When my wife was

pregnant, she kept thinking that there was peeping Toms staring through the bedroom window at her. She should have been so lucky!’

Even Simon Fairbrother had suggested that the legs that had been seen crossing the ceiling by the pupils of Year Two at Brookwood School might have been the result of ‘mass hysteria’. He had already been talking to one of the Met’s counselling psychologists about it.

Jamila poked at her vegan salad. ‘Unless people have witnessed a supernatural phenomenon for themselves, it is almost impossible to convince them that such things can really happen. But you know and I know that this Scratch does exist somewhere, even if it is not here and now, in the present day.’

‘Well, that’s what we’re guessing, based on what little we know about him.’

‘Yes,’ said Jamila. ‘But Ghost must have been smelling that Archie was there, at number 9, or that he *had* been there sometime in the past. And I would bet money that Scratch was there too. That was where Adele said that Scratch was hiding, in his cellar. And it was Scratch who was giving them shelter.’

‘Then why didn’t Ghost pull Archie out, the same way he pulled out Adele?’

‘Maybe he could not do it through that solid brick paving. Or maybe Scratch was too strong for him, psychologically, or psychically, who knows?’

‘So what’s your suggestion?’ asked Jerry, with a mouthful of sausage sandwich.

‘I think it is clear that Scratch is somehow affecting time. Many scientists believe in parallel existences, and it could be that he has managed to make wartime London overlap with today’s London. I know it sounds like a fantasy, but it is perfectly possible. It is all to do with string theory. If you like, I will explain it to you.’

‘Not while I’m eating, Sarge, if you don’t mind. I’ll take your word for it. When I was at school I came second to

bottom in physics. I couldn't tell a magnetic field from a Mars bar.'

'Very well. But take my word for it, it *is* possible. Einstein believed it was possible, and there is a physicist called Brian Greene who is sure that parallel worlds exist. He calls them "multiverses", and he has used words to describe them that are very similar to the way in which Scratch described time travel to Charles Dickens. The only difference is that Brian Greene says that the universe is like a pack of cards, which can be shuffled, rather than a book.'

'Right,' said Jerry. 'You've lost me already. I thought that string theory was what you needed when you came to wrapping Christmas presents.'

Jamila closed her eyes for a moment, trying to be patient with him. Then she said, 'What I am trying to say to you, Jerry, is that if you are right about this Fishmonger, then it is conceivable that it was not a copycat who murdered Kathleen Hartley, but actually him. The real, actual him, brought by Scratch from the nineteenth century to now. It is also conceivable that all these other murders and the blinding of Yusuf Nadeem were carried out by other perpetrators from other times.'

'So you think that all these perps could be part of Scratch's Army? That they're all working for him?'

'It might sound like madness, but it has a horrible logic to it. Think of the tram that ran over that poor Mary Jonas. She could well have been taken back to 1941, the same time as Adele and Archie, and killed *then*, before her body was brought back to the present day. Perhaps the man who killed her was trying to burn her so that we would not be able to see the tram tracks.'

'I suppose it makes some kind of sense.'

'Then think of the man who shot Kenneth Treagus,' Jamila continued. 'Where were his feet? And where was the head of the man who was last seen talking to Kathleen Hartley? Where was the body of the head that was talking to Sabina Ferris? I am prepared to believe they were all in the same place, but in

another time, in buildings that had once been there, but were bombed or demolished decades ago.'

'You could well be right,' Jerry told her. He wiped his mouth on his napkin and sat back. 'And we know of only one person who can muck around with time like that, and that's our mate Scratch. But if he's that clever, how do we beard him in his cellar, so to speak?'

Jamila thought for a moment, and then she said, 'I think that we have a chance of cornering him if we track down and catch all the murderers who make up this "army" of his. If they really do come from another time, like the Fishmonger, then they depend on him for their very existence. Adele and Archie agreed to go out stealing for him, on the promise that he would send them back to the year they came from. Maybe these murderers go out stealing and killing for him in return for him keeping them alive, even though technically they died decades ago. They need him. But think about it. Why does he need *them*? He is trapped in a darkened cellar. How else is he going to survive?'

'That's all very well, Sarge, but how do we go about nailing them? Fairbrother and Baker and Morrison aren't having a lot of luck, are they?'

'No, but they are trying to find them in the present day, and they are not here, in the present day. We need to go and find them in the time that they exist.'

'Yes, but how? We haven't got a police box.'

'Granted, Jerry. But we have Ghost.'

19

It was raining hard when they parked outside Guy's Hospital and ran into the entrance. They presented themselves to reception, but they already knew the way up to intensive care. Both of them had been there too often before.

The anaesthetic that Edward Dance had been given while his intestines and his stomach lining were sutured had worn off now, and he was awake. His speech was still slurred, and he had to pause now and again to focus clearly on what had happened to him. As he spoke, his eyes kept darting towards the door as if he were afraid that the woman and the man who had robbed him and stabbed him might unexpectedly reappear.

His older sister June had arrived to see him, a short snappy woman who looked like a librarian, and his partner, Robert, was on the way from Dorset. Jamila asked his sister if she could leave them for twenty minutes or so, so they could ask Edward a few questions about the assault.

'You won't upset him though? He's in such a state.'

'Please, do not worry. We have done this many times before.'

Jamila and Jerry drew up chairs on either side of Edward's bed. Jerry said, 'Sorry, mate. We would have brought you some chocolates but it says "nil by mouth".'

Edward gave him a slanted smile. 'That's because I won't be able to go to the toilet for at least a month.'

'Before you went into surgery, you told one of our detectives that a woman appeared in your jewellery shop, but you had no idea how she could have gained access. You were

sure that you had already locked the door and set the alarm. Is that right?’

Edward nodded. ‘The only way she could have got in is if she had hidden herself somewhere in the shop before I closed up, and I’m ninety-nine per cent sure she couldn’t have done that. She would have had to lie on the floor, behind one of the counters, and she was too tall and too elegant for that. I’m sure I would have seen her, anyhow.’

‘Apparently she had a 1940s look about her.’

‘That’s right. Her coat, and her hairstyle. The way she spoke too. When I told her to get out, she said “all right, don’t snap your cap”. I remember my grandmother saying that, but do you ever hear anybody saying that these days?’

‘You can draw us a picture of her?’

‘Of course. I went to art school before I took up jewellery – Goldsmith’s. For two terms, anyhow.’

‘And what about the man who grabbed you from behind and stabbed you? You did not manage to get a look at him at all?’

‘No. But he had a very distinctive accent. I’d say that he came from somewhere up north. But it wasn’t like Liverpool or Manchester or Leeds. Maybe Newcastle.’

‘That’s the only accent I can’t take off,’ said Jerry.

‘Oh – and there’s one thing more!’ said Edward. ‘I was going to tell your associate but they wheeled me off to the theatre before I had the chance. After he’d stabbed me, he said something like, “Now you know why they call me the Back Stabber”.’

*

‘What if we are mistaken about all these investigations?’ said Jamila, when they returned to Lavender Hill. ‘What if they are *not* connected, and Scratch had nothing to do with any of them?’

‘Hang on. I thought you said they probably did, and they all had a horrible logic.’

‘Only because there seems to be no other explanation, that is why. In each assault, only part of the perpetrator appeared, but in every one it was a different part. A head, or legs, or half a body. Edward Dance said he saw the whole woman in his jewellery shop, but he could not see the man, so we cannot tell if the whole man was actually visible, or just his sleeve.’

‘I thought you were the one who believed in all this parallel universe stuff. You told me your granny saw half a body in a hijab, sliding down the corridor.’

‘I do believe in it, Jerry. And I am hoping that we are not chasing shadows. But I have to question myself. I have seen so many miscarriages of justice because a police officer refused to accept that there might be some alternative explanation for what had happened.’

Jerry sat down and switched on his computer. ‘I’ll tell you what. Let’s just go after these offenders one by one, and when we collar them, we’ll soon find out if we were right about them being connected or not. Who shall we go for first?’

Jamila sat next to him and looked down the list of suspects.

‘Let us see if we can find the man who murdered Kathleen Hartley,’ she said. ‘It could have been this Fishmonger, or somebody imitating him. But Adele mentioned that a man with a similar name was part of Scratch’s Army, a man who smelled of fish. That should be a scent that Ghost finds easy to follow, no matter what century he is hiding in.’

‘Right,’ said Jerry. ‘Do you fancy a cuppa? I’m gagging for a coffee.’

‘Yes, please. Meanwhile, I will see if I can get in touch with Mr and Mrs Hartley, and arrange for Ghost to have a sniff around their house.’

Jerry left their office and started to walk along the corridor towards the lifts. He was only halfway there when two men appeared around the corner up ahead of him. They stood blocking the corridor, one with his arms folded and the other with his hands in his pockets.

Jerry slowed down. These two men looked more like criminals than police officers. One of them was well over six feet tall, with a broken nose. He was wearing a grey cap and a tight-fitting grey suit. The other was shorter, but still heavily built, with a trilby hat and a Crombie overcoat, like a dodgy bookmaker from a racetrack.

‘Excuse me, gents,’ said Jerry, as he approached them.

Neither of them moved, and they were both staring at him, unblinking, as if they were daring him to try and push his way past them.

‘Have you got a problem?’ Jerry asked them. ‘I said, “excuse me”. I’m trying to get to the lifts here.’

‘I think the problem’s yours, mate,’ said the man in the tight grey suit.

‘What are you talking about? Are you going to get out of my way, or what?’

‘You’ve been poking your nose in where it’s not wanted, you and that Paki woman. Don’t think it ain’t gone unnoticed.’

‘I still don’t know what you’re on about.’

‘I’ll tell you what we’re on about,’ put in the man in the Crombie overcoat. ‘There’s certain addresses you’re not welcome to take your dogs to, looking for trouble. Because if that’s what you do, you’re going to find trouble, and I can guarantee that.’

‘Are you talking about number 9, St Oswald’s Place, by any chance?’

‘That’s right, mate,’ said the man in the grey suit. ‘You ain’t as stupid as you look, are you?’

‘So you two – you’re both Scratch’s minions, are you?’

‘You watch your fucking mouth. And don’t you mention names you don’t know nothing about. You want to show some respect, you do.’

‘So what are you doing here?’ Jerry demanded. ‘How about I arrest you both for threatening behaviour? That would be a

good start, wouldn't it? There's some very comfortable cells downstairs, if you'd like to come with me.'

'No, mate, you're the one who's going to come with us. We're going to show you what you get for being a nosy parker. And don't you worry – once we've sorted *you* out, we'll be back for that Paki bird.'

'You're having a Turkish, you are,' said Jerry. 'In case you hadn't noticed, you mug, you're inside a police station. How do you think you're going to get me to come with you? All I have to do is shout out for help, and you're toast.'

'Oh, yes?' said the man in the Crombie overcoat. 'I always find that *this* works wonders when it comes to changing people's minds.' He reached inside his coat and drew out a large black automatic pistol, which he pointed at Jerry's face. 'Imagine what you'd look like with no bonce.'

Jerry said nothing, but looked down at the floor. In fact, he was judging the distance between them.

'So let's go, shall we, sunshine?' said the man in the tight grey suit. 'The man whose name you had the fucking nerve to mention would like a word with you, before we decide what to do with you after that.'

'Oh, you mean Scratch?'

'I *told* you not to—' the man began, but Jerry spun around and kicked the automatic out of the other man's hand. At the same time, he pulled his own pistol out of his shoulder holster and cocked it.

The .45 automatic clattered to the floor and its hammer hit the skirting board, so that it went off with a deafening bang. The bullet ricocheted off the wall and then hit the wall on the opposite side.

Jerry held his pistol in both hands, pointing it first at one man and then at the other.

'Down on the floor!' he shouted at them. 'Come on – down on the floor – face down – hands behind your heads – *now!*'

Only a few seconds later, the station alarm was set off. He heard running feet and shouting as officers came scrambling out of their duty rooms to find out who had let off a gun. Jamila came out too, and as soon as she saw Jerry she hurried up the corridor to join him. She looked down at the two men lying on the floor, and said, 'What? What has happened? Who fired that shot?'

Three more officers appeared around the corner, one of them armed with a Heckler & Koch carbine. 'What's going on?' the armed officer asked.

'I've just stopped a couple of intruders,' Jerry told them. 'They pulled a weapon on me and it went off by accident. They could do with cuffing.'

He stepped back, and quietly said to Jamila, 'They're two of Scratch's men. They knew that we'd been to St Oswald's Place and they came looking for us.'

'Are you serious?'

'Hundred per cent. They were threatening to take me out of here to meet him, and then I reckon they were going to snuff me. After that they said they were coming back for you.' He jerked his head towards the automatic lying on the floor. 'Never been so glad I got that blue belt in kickboxing.'

DCI Chance arrived. 'What the hell is going on? Who are these two?'

Jerry bent over the man in the tight grey suit. 'What's your name, chum?'

'Fuck off,' the man told him.

'Do you spell that with an "f" or a "ph"?''

The two men were cautioned, handcuffed and then hoisted up onto their feet. DCI Chance ordered them to be taken down to the cells and legal advisers called for each of them.

As they were led away, the man in the Crombie overcoat turned back to Jerry. He had an extraordinary expression on his face that Jerry had never seen before: a strange mixture of contempt and amusement.

‘You’re going to regret what you did today, pal. You can’t even imagine how much.’

*

‘This is most disturbing,’ said Jamila, when they were back in their office. Jerry had been down to the canteen to fetch her a cup of lemon tea and a black coffee for himself, although he felt more like a double brandy.

‘How did those two know who we were, Jerry, and where we had come from? And how did they manage to get into the station without anybody challenging them? The first time I came here, they would not even let me past the reception desk until I had shown them my ID.’

‘Well, as soon as their briefs show up we can ask them, although I’d be amazed if they tell us. But at least we know now that Scratch actually exists, for real, and that he does have an army with some nasty pieces of work in it.’

‘They must have seen us when Ghost led us to number 9 St Oswald’s Place. But I saw no sign of them when we were there, did you? You are right though. If Scratch did not exist, he would not have sent those two to find us. And it also proves that Scratch still has Archie, in one time or another. It was Archie’s scent that Ghost was following, after all.’

‘What worries me most is that Scratch is after *us* now, instead of the other way around. And we don’t have any idea how many of these goons he’s got working for him. We’ll have to keep a sharp eye out, you and me. If they can get into this station without being challenged, and know what floor we’re on, it’s quite possible that they know where we live and they can get into our flats too, when we least expect it.’

A young forensic investigator knocked at their open office door. Jerry thought that he looked like a school prefect.

‘Right,’ said the forensic investigator, peeling off his wire-rimmed spectacles, ‘I’ve retrieved the round that was fired from the Colt, and I’ll be taking the weapon itself back to Lambeth Road so that we can examine it. As a matter of interest, it’s one of the oldest guns I’ve come across.’

He laid the automatic down on the desk in front of them, in its polythene evidence bag, and pointed to some small lettering on the side of the grip. 'You see here... it's stamped RAF. That means it was one of a consignment of two thousand Colt automatics that were bought for the Royal Air Force in 1940. And yet the funny thing is, its condition is remarkable. Whoever owns it, they certainly took good care of it. If you'd asked me before I saw that RAF stamp, I would have said it was practically new.'

'Is there any chance we can find out who owns it, or who might have owned it in the past?'

'It's possible, I suppose, especially if it was sold by a legitimate arms dealer, although I shouldn't think that's very likely. Judging by its condition, though, I'd guess that it's been pretty much untouched since the end of the war. Maybe some RAF officer kept it after he was demobbed, and it's only fallen into the wrong hands very recently. But we should be able to lift prints and DNA off the butt and off the bullets in the magazine.'

'Did you find any other forensic evidence?'

'No, surprisingly, since it's so wet outside. I found no footprints anywhere. Not in the corridor, not in the lift, not on the stairs. I can only surmise that those two gentlemen were already in the building before it started to rain.'

'Thank you,' said Jamila. 'DC Pardoe and I will be going out shortly, but if you find anything of importance, you can always contact us. We believe this is connected to a very serious offence.'

'I can tell that,' said the forensic investigator, picking up the automatic. 'This is one very serious gun.'

‘Can we offer you some tea?’ asked Mrs Hartley.

‘No, no thank you,’ said Jamila. ‘We will not be disturbing you for long.’

‘I have chocolate biscuits, if you’d like some.’

‘No, really, thank you. You’re very kind.’

It was obvious that Mr and Mrs Hartley were still in deep shock after their daughter’s murder. They had cut short their holiday in Tenerife as soon as they had been contacted about it, but Kathleen Hartley’s body was still in the morgue pending further examination. Because of that, there had been very little for them to do since they had returned except to wait for her release for burial. They had been more than willing for Charlie to bring Ghost around.

Ghost was in the dining room now, snuffling around, and occasionally letting out little sneezes.

The Hartleys stood side by side under the reproduction of *The Singing Butler*, as stiff as two shop-window dummies. Their answers to Jamila’s questions were monosyllabic and expressionless, as if they had learned them from a script.

Did they know of any men friends that Kathleen might have been seeing lately? *No*. Did she mention that she had argued with anybody lately? *No*. Had any of her pupils’ parents been aggressive, for instance? *Not that she mentioned, no*.

Most of this information Jamila and Jerry already knew, since they had scrolled through Kathleen’s phone and laptop to see if she had belonged to any online dating agencies, or if she had upset anybody on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. Yet it

was always possible that she might have dropped some casual remark to her parents about somebody who wished her harm.

Ghost eventually came panting out of the dining room, pulling Charlie behind him. Jerry recognised that look in Ghost's green eyes. It was the same concentrated stare that he had given when he had picked up the scent from Adele and Archie's bedrooms.

'There, you see? He's not making a beeline for you two,' Charlie told Mr and Mrs Hartley. 'That means he's identified an unusual smell in there. He can tell that somebody's been in there who's not a member of the family.'

He turned to Jamila and Jerry and added, 'The way he's been sneezing, I reckon he's picked up some pheromones too.'

Both Jamila and Jerry knew what Charlie meant by that, and so he had no need to explain himself further. Kathleen Hartley had been sexually assaulted, either before or after her throat had been cut, so it was likely that her assailant had been exuding androstenone, a pheromone given off by men when they become aroused.

'I can tell that he's got a picture of the suspect in his head,' said Charlie. 'If only there was a way of plugging his brain into a computer and seeing what was in there. Or if only he could draw. Or talk.'

Jerry patted Ghost on the head. 'If he could talk, Charlie, he wouldn't be working as a police dog. He'd have his own chat show on TV.'

'Will he be able to track down who did it?' asked Mr Hartley.

'If anybody can, Ghost can,' said Charlie.

'Whoever ended poor Kathy's life needs hanging. It's time they brought back capital punishment. I talked to your other officer, Detective Inspector Fairweather is it? But he still wouldn't tell us exactly what was done to her. He said it was better that we didn't know, but we should just remember her the way she was.'

Outside the Hartleys' house, Ghost was straining so hard against his harness that he was breathing in high, whistling screams.

'So what's the plan now?' asked Jerry. 'I'm not sure if I've got what it takes for another three-mile hike. My plates are still throbbing from last time.'

'Don't worry,' said Charlie. 'I'll follow Ghost, wherever he wants to take me. When we get there, I'll give you a bell and you can drive there. We'll need a vehicle anyhow if we're able to make an arrest.'

'Okay, fine. But for your sake I hope the perp hasn't bugged off to Manchester or somewhere like that. You'll still be walking next Thursday fortnight.'

*

As Jamila and Jerry returned to the station, they were approached by Sergeant Willis, the custody officer. He told them that a solicitor was on his way to represent the men who had tried to abduct Jerry, and that he was expected to arrive in twenty minutes or so. Meanwhile, both men had refused to give their names or addresses, or answer any questions.

'They're a right pair though. I don't expect prisoners to be sociable, but these two... talk about aggressive.'

Jerry checked his watch. 'Let's hope it's not too long before Ghost tracks down that suspect from the Hartleys. Otherwise I might be forced to order a McDonald's.'

'They can knock up a cheeseburger for you in the canteen, can't they?' said Sergeant Willis.

'They can. I've tried one. But never again. Cheeseburger? More like donkeyburger with melted plastic.'

Jamila and Jerry went back up to their office. Until they heard from Charlie, there was little more they could do. They had received no further updates from the detectives who were investigating the other cases that might have some connection to Scratch.

‘This is doing my head in,’ said Jerry, sitting down and propping his feet up on his desk.

‘Have you heard from your Linda?’ asked Jamila.

‘No, I rang her but she hung up on me. I think I need to go back to charm school.’

‘You know, I find it most difficult to maintain a relationship in this job. It has made me suspicious of all men and their motives. The owner of an Indian cash-and-carry store in Woodford asked me to marry him. He was handsome and wealthy, but for some reason I did not trust him.’

‘You should marry *me*. Then we could both be suspicious together.’

Jamila looked across at him and raised one thinly plucked eyebrow. For one moment Jerry thought she might say, *Why don't we give it a go?* But then she smiled and gave a little shake of her head and turned back to her computer.

Jamila's phone rang. It was the Martian, calling from Lambeth Road.

‘DS Patel? We've carried out some preliminary tests on that Colt .45 automatic.’

‘Oh, yes? And have you found out where it might have come from?’

‘The RAF stamp hasn't been touched, but there's been some attempt to file off the serial numbers on the action. That would suggest that at some point the weapon was stolen. We've restored the numbers with Magnaflux and I'll send them over to you so you can have a crack at tracing its origin – which RAF depot it might have been nicked from, for example.’

‘Thank you, Derek. Every little helps.’

‘Ah! But wait! That's not all, by any means! We've examined the rifling on the bullet that was retrieved from the wall in the police station corridor, and guess what? It's an exact match for the rifling on the bullet that killed Kenneth Treagus. Even if they weren't fired by the same offender, those bullets were fired from the same weapon.’

‘Really? They match? That could be *very* helpful. We are still waiting for the suspect’s legal representative to arrive. As soon as he does, though, we can present the suspect with that evidence, and see how he reacts.’

Jamila put down her phone and told Jerry what the Martian had said.

‘Blimey O’Reilly. And we’ve got him banged up downstairs. What a wally. It’s almost like he handed himself in.’

‘Jerry – if he is the perpetrator who shot Kenneth Treagus, you are extremely lucky that he did not shoot *you*. There are times in this job when I think we should give thanks to whatever higher beings we believe in.’

Jerry pressed his hands together and looked up to the ceiling. ‘Thank you, Magic Uncle in the Clouds.’

Jamila’s phone rang again. This time, when she answered it, she frowned and said, ‘What? What do you mean? Very well, we will come down straight away.’

‘What now?’ Jerry asked her.

‘The lawyer has arrived, but there is a problem. The two men are no longer there.’

‘Sorry, I don’t get it. What do you mean they’re no longer there?’

‘Sergeant Willis said their cells are empty. The doors were still locked, but they have gone, both of them.’

Jerry stared at her. ‘Bloody hell. They’ve pulled the same trick as that Jasper Starke did at Bishopsgate nick, back in 1880. This can’t be a coincidence.’

‘I agree with you. How can it be? They entered the station without being challenged at reception and they left no footprints. Now they have vanished. What other explanation can there be except that they appeared from another world and now they have returned to it? I had my doubts but now I am even more certain than ever that we are looking for offenders from a parallel time. Or *times*, even – plural.’

They went downstairs to the custody suite. Sergeant Willis was standing there with Simon Fairbrother and a grey-haired solicitor with his glasses perched on the end of his nose, looking more annoyed than mystified.

‘I don’t know what the Met’s coming to these days,’ snapped the solicitor. ‘I cut short a meeting with an important client to come down here, but you’ve let the suspects get away. Didn’t you see them walk out of here, or are you all blind?’

‘I do not think that insults are called for, sir,’ said Jamila. ‘We will be investigating how they managed to escape and if necessary we will be in touch with you again.’

‘Complete waste of my very valuable time,’ grumbled the solicitor, and he left.

Jamila and Jerry turned to Simon Fairbrother and Sergeant Willis and they all looked as blank as each other.

‘There is no way they could have escaped from those cells,’ said Sergeant Willis. ‘The doors are still secure and not even an expert locksmith could have opened them up. Besides, I was here all the time, and if somebody had started fiddling around with the locks, I would have heard them and seen them.’

The cell doors were open now and Jerry peered into both of them. He even ducked down to look under the bunks.

‘Any ideas?’ asked Simon Fairbrother.

Jerry shook his head. He didn’t want to try explaining parallel worlds and string theory. He barely understood it himself, and Simon Fairbrother would probably think that both he and Jamila were losing their marbles. Apart from that, it was perfectly possible that their theory about Scratch and time travel was completely misguided and that the two men had vanished by means of some obscure physics that nobody had ever heard of. Maybe they possessed some way of dispersing their atoms and disappearing through the walls like sand through a sieve.

‘I don’t know, guv,’ he told Simon Fairbrother. ‘All I can say is, eat your heart out, Houdini!’

Herbert Chance joined them. Sergeant Willis briefly explained how he had come to open up the men's cells to find that they had disappeared.

Herbert Chance listened with a grim expression, and then he said, 'This doesn't get out. Nobody gets to hear about this, do you understand? If anybody asks you about those two suspects, you don't know what they're talking about. You've never seen them and you've never heard about them and you certainly didn't know that they've disappeared out of their cells.'

He paused, sucking in his lips. Then he said, 'DS Patel? Any thoughts on how these two managed to get out?'

'Not yet, sir. We are still trying to understand how they managed to get in.'

*

Jamila and Jerry returned to their office. Herbert Chance had called for forensic investigators to examine the cells from which the two men had disappeared, although neither Jamila nor Jerry believed they would find any evidence of how they had escaped.

Jerry changed his mind about a McDonald's and ordered a chorizo pizza to be delivered from Four Hundred Rabbits. Jamila wanted nothing more than a tofu roll and a cup of lemon tea from the canteen. For the next hour they sat in silence. Jamila caught up with her outstanding reports on racial unrest in Redbridge while Jerry played a post-apocalyptic video game, *The Last of Us*, in which a man has to save a young girl from an outbreak of zombies.

A few minutes after five o'clock, Jamila's phone rang. It was Charlie, and he sounded out of breath.

'DS Patel? Ghost's still going like the clappers. There's no question about it, the scent he's after must be really strong. He's led me all the way up the Kennington Park Road and now we've reached the Elephant. Only God and Ghost know where he'll be heading after that, but I'll keep in touch.'

'Thank you, Charlie. We will be waiting to hear from you.'

21

Jerry ate three slices of his pizza and then nodded off, his head resting on his desk. Jamila switched off her computer and closed her eyes too, although she couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about the jinn that her grandmother had seen sliding along the corridor, and the way in which those two men had appeared in the police station corridor, but then vanished from their cells, as if they had never been more than an optical illusion.

She found it unnerving to be confronted by evidence that the walls around her were not at all solid, and that it could be possible to pass from one world to another, and from one time to another. Even more disturbing was the thought that hiding in those other worlds and other times there were criminals who were determined to come through to abduct them, and almost certainly kill them.

And then there was Scratch. Did he really exist, or was he nothing more than one of Charles Dickens's fanciful inventions? If he did exist, who or what was he, and what did he look like, apart from his orange eyes? Did he truly have the power to make one London overlap with another, and to send people backwards and forwards in time, from one decade into another?

About half an hour after his first call, Charlie rang again. Jerry grunted at the sound of Jamila's phone, and almost pushed his pizza box off the edge of his desk, although he didn't wake up.

'Ghost has led me over London Bridge,' said Charlie. 'Now we're on Lower Thames Street, heading east. He's still jogging along at the same pace. No let-up at all. Whoever he's after, he

knows where they are and he's going to find them. And I reckon they're not too far away now.'

Jamila went over to Jerry and shook his shoulder to wake him. He looked up, blinking, as if he didn't know where he was, or how he had come to be here.

'Charlie has called again. He believes that Ghost may be close to the suspect now. We need to be ready to join him.'

'Where is he?'

'He's just crossed London Bridge and now he's making his way east.'

'Right. I'll just go to the inky-dinky-ha-ha room and then I'll be fit for action.'

*

Less than ten minutes later, Charlie called once more.

'He's found him. He's all of a-quiver. The trouble is, I don't see how we're going to get in there. It's all closed up.'

'Where are you?'

'Old Billingsgate Market, on Lower Thames Street. It's only about five minutes' walk from London Bridge.'

'Never mind. We will come at once and join you. It should not take us longer than half an hour.'

'That's all right. It's a bit on the breezy side but it's not too chilly and we could both use a rest. I'll give Ghost a drink and some Grub Clubs. He's excited all right, but he's nearly as knackered as I am.'

Jamila turned to Jerry. 'Ghost has stopped at Old Billingsgate Market.'

'Jesus – I should have guessed it. That was where Jasper Starke used to work. The Fishmonger.'

'It is not a fish market now, though, is it?'

'No. They moved the fish market to Docklands sometime in the 1980s. It's some sort of entertainment venue now, so far as I know. But this is still getting seriously creepy.'

‘Well, let us go and see it for ourselves.’

They buckled on their shoulder holsters, with their SIG Sauer automatics, and shrugged on their coats. Then they hurried downstairs and climbed into the unmarked Volvo saloon that was parked ready for them outside the back door. They drove out onto Lavender Hill with squealing tyres and a flashing blue light.

‘Could he really be the same Jasper Starke?’ asked Jamila.

Jerry swerved around a bus and narrowly avoided an elderly woman who was trying to cross the road from behind it.

‘I don’t give a monkey’s if he is or he isn’t. If he’s there, he’s still going to have his collar felt.’

‘But what if he disappears from his cell, like those other two? How are we going to arrest offenders who cannot be kept locked up? Maybe it *is* Scratch who enables them to disappear, but if they vanish before we can ask them any questions, what hope do we have of finding him?’

‘These goons can bend the laws of physics, can’t they, so I don’t see any reason why we can’t bend the law to catch them. If we can collar the geezer who killed Kathleen Hartley, whether he’s Jasper Starke or not, I reckon we should forget about his rights and question him straight away. A little roughly, if we have to.’

‘But even if he tells us something, it will not be admissible in court.’

‘Who cares? If he disappears into thin air after we’ve questioned him, we won’t be able to take him to court, will we? You can’t prosecute somebody who isn’t there.’

Jerry switched on the siren to clear their way round the Elephant and Castle, and then sped towards London Bridge. Traffic was heavy because it was going-home time, but he managed to weave his way in and out of it, only occasionally swearing and switching on the siren again.

They crossed London Bridge, turned down Lower Thames Street, and parked behind the Italian-style building that had once been Billingsgate fish market. Charlie was waiting for

them on the wide stone terrace that overlooked the Thames. On the opposite bank rose the shining triangular Shard, over a thousand feet tall, the tallest building in Britain, and only half a mile downriver they could see Tower Bridge. Only the lightest of breezes was blowing off the water, but it was enough to make Jamila shiver.

Charlie was sitting on the low wall smoking a cigarette, with Ghost sitting beside him. As they came closer, they could see that Ghost was still quivering, and occasionally he was letting out little snuffling sounds.

‘He is shaking,’ said Jamila. ‘Is that because he can smell that our suspect is somewhere inside this building?’ asked Jamila.

‘Almost sure of it.’

‘But you have not yet gone inside to try and locate him?’

‘No. They close at five-thirty. There’s a concierge in there, or whatever you call him, and I expect he would have let me in. But I didn’t want to risk it, not without backup, given what the suspect’s suspected of. Ghost is gasping to get in there, I can tell you, but I didn’t want to take the risk of him being filleted. Or me, for that matter.’

‘Very sensible,’ said Jamila. ‘But let us go in now and see if Ghost can sniff him out for us.’

Charlie flicked away his cigarette butt and then they followed Ghost up the steps and into the arcade that ran along the back of the building. They could see the attendant through the windows, and Jerry went up to knock on the glass to let them in.

When he knocked, though, something extraordinary happened. The window disappeared, as if it had never been there, and suddenly the market hall in front of them was crowded with stalls, and men and woman in aprons, and the strongest smell of fish.

Apart from the smell, the noise was deafening. Stallholders were shouting and swearing and porters were pushing barrows between the stalls with squeaking wheels. The market was lit

with dazzling electric globes suspended from the ceiling, so that the fish stacked in their boxes were gleaming as if they had just been pulled out of the sea.

Jerry was stunned. He looked round at Jamila and Charlie to see if they could see this bustling fish market too. Jamila's mouth was open in shock, but Charlie was too busy holding Ghost back. Ghost was straining at his harness and his claws were scrabbling on the black-and-white tiled floor.

'What has happened?' said Jamila. 'Charlie – what in the world has happened?'

'It's Ghost – he's gone back in time, I reckon. It's the same like he did in that basement, when he pulled out that young lass, but now he's pulled *us* in too. Maybe he felt like he needed us to come with him.'

Jerry turned around. It was still dark outside, but the sky in the east was a pale orange colour, as if the sun were rising. There was no sign of the Shard, or of Tower Bridge, and the banks of the Thames were crowded with barges and sailing boats.

'I don't believe this is happening,' he told Jamila. 'I'm dreaming this, right? We're still back at the station and I've been dreaming this right from the very beginning.'

Jamila grasped his arm. She was breathing hard, as if she had been running. 'Jerry, this is real. This is exactly like the parallel worlds of the jinns, and the way that Scratch described time. Each day is like a page. You may have read it, and turned over to the next page, but it is still there, that page, and you can turn back to it. This is what has happened.'

Ghost barked, twice, and he was doing everything he could to drag Charlie into the market hall.

'Our suspect's here, all right,' said Charlie. 'And he's not too far away.'

They followed Charlie and Ghost between the stalls. Each stall was piled high with boxes of salmon and turbot and mackerel and cod, as well as live lobsters and oysters and octopus. The air was so chilly that their breath smoked, and

there was crushed ice scattered across the floor, so that they made a crunching sound as they walked. Porters pushed past them, carrying hampers of fish on their heads, and Jerry was flapped on the ear by a passing turbot tail. The swearing and shouting was continuous.

They had to edge their way through the crowds of restaurant owners and costermongers who were queuing to buy fish, with repeated 'excuse me's, and they were given some very curious stares. Not only were they following a panting Labrador, their coats were such an unusual cut for whatever year this was, and they were all bare-headed. Unlike everybody else in the market, neither Jerry nor Charlie was wearing a top hat or a bowler, and Jamila was not wearing a toque with a ribbon tied under her chin.

Ghost was wheezing now, because he was pulling so hard on his harness. He was heading towards a stall with a sign hanging above it, *Ebenezer Newby, 15 St Mary-on-the-Hill*.

In front of the stall, a man in a brown cap and a long apron was gutting sea bream with a long thin-bladed knife, and a dark-haired young woman in a white nun-like bonnet was picking crabs out of a tub and shaking them. As they approached, the man turned around, and Jerry recognised him at once. In a way, he had been expecting it, but it still gave him a cold tingling sensation to come face to face with a man he had seen only in a faded sepia photograph taken almost a century and a half ago. It was Jasper Starke, with that distinctive walrus moustache and that unmistakable Telly Savalas smirk.

'Ere!' snapped Jasper Starke, pointing his knife at Ghost. 'No fuckin' dogs allowed in the market, mate! Get 'im out of 'ere or I'll call for the clerk and 'ave 'im fuckin' chucked out! Arse-first, and all!'

Ghost was undeterred. He trotted straight up to Jasper Starke and stood rigidly in front of him. Then he gave a single sharp bark, and stayed there, his tail erect, quivering.

Jamila came around the end of the stall to stand beside Charlie. Jerry took a few steps off to the left, keeping his hand

inside his coat, on the butt of his automatic, just in case Jasper Starke tried to make a run for it, or became violent.

Jerry was doing his best to appear calm, but he was thinking: even if we collar him, how are we going to get him back to the present day? How are we going to get back there ourselves? What if we're trapped in this time forever? Jesus, they don't have laptops, or mobile phones, or television, or aeroplanes, or *cars*, even. If he turns stroppy, I can't even call for backup.

It made him feel light-headed, as if he were drunk.

'Are you Jasper Starke?' asked Jamila, loudly and clearly.

Jasper Starke gave all three of them a shifty look, and then said, 'What of it?'

'Jasper Starke, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Kathleen Hartley. You do not have to say anything. But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence.'

Jasper Starke stared at her as if she were mad.

'What in God's name are you blabberin' on about, woman? Who are you? You're not mutton shunters! Arrestin' me? *Arrestin'* me? The crows didn't let you out of Bedlam by mistake, did they?'

Jerry said, 'We're genuine police officers, mate, and you're under arrest for murder. You're coming along with us, whether you like it or not.'

'You'd make a stuffed bird laugh, you would! Oo put you up to this? It wasn't that Ebenezer, was it? E's always pullin' some kind of jape!'

Jerry unclipped the handcuffs from his belt and held them up. 'Lay down that blade and turn around, okay, with your hands behind your back. We don't want any trouble.'

Jasper Starke lifted his knife higher, and his tone turned hoarser and colder. 'I thought you was 'avin' a laugh, but you ain't, are you? I don't know who the fuck you are, but if you

know what's good for you, you and this mutt'll turn tail and get the fuck out of 'ere, before I guts you all like this 'ere bream!'

'Put down that knife, Mr Starke,' said Jamila. 'You are only making things worse for yourself. Making threats with a blade in a public place is an offence in itself. So is assault with intent to avoid arrest.'

Ghost growled, and bared his teeth. Jasper Starke jabbed his knife in Ghost's direction and said, 'You can keep your sauce box shut too, you mutt, less'n you're lookin' to be dog cutlets!'

The young woman in the white bonnet had stopped sorting crabs and was standing back, her hands pressed together as if she were praying. Jasper Starke glanced sideways at her – once, and then twice, and then again, licking his lips. Jerry thought he was trying to make up his mind about something.

'So... are you going to come peacefully?' Jamila asked him.

Jasper Starke didn't answer. Instead, he took a sudden step to the left and grabbed the young woman's sleeve in his fist, dragging her in front of him. She let out a little yelp of fright, but he said, 'Shut it, Emma!' and held her close up against his chest, with one arm hooked around her waist and his knife held horizontally in front of her throat.

'Now!' he said. 'You lot can do a scoot, and as quick as you like, or else this dollymop's going up the golden staircase, right in front of your mincers.'

Both Jamila and Jerry reached into their coats and pulled out their pistols.

'Drop the knife and let the girl go,' ordered Jamila.

Ghost snarled again, and clawed impatiently at the tiles.

Jasper Starke peered at their pistols intently for a moment from behind a wing of the young woman's bonnet, clearly mystified, but then he let out a phlegm-thickened laugh. 'What you got there? Ha! Call those barkers? Go on, make yourselves scarce before I do somethin' you regret!'

The young woman was too terrified to speak, but she was staring at Jamila and Jerry and she was pleading with her eyes.

‘This is your last chance, Starke,’ said Jerry. ‘Let the girl go.’

Several fishmongers and porters had noticed that there was some kind of disturbance at Ebenezer Newby’s stall and they were beginning to gather round. Without taking his eyes off Jasper Starke, Jerry said to Jamila, ‘He won’t have the nerve to hurt her, not in front of all these witnesses. They still hanged murderers in these days, didn’t they?’

‘I ain’t warnin’ you again,’ said Jasper Starke. ‘If you three and your dog ain’t a distant memory by the time I count to three, the dollymop gets it.’

Jerry edged his way around the side of the stall, trying to make sure that he could get a clean shot at Jasper Starke’s head, if he needed to. It was difficult, because Jasper Starke kept tilting the young woman from side to side and ducking his head down behind the wings of her bonnet. He had laughed scornfully at their ‘barkers’, but it was obvious that he was trying to avoid being shot.

Jamila looked around at the gathering crowd. ‘Jerry – we cannot wait this out. Not like we usually do.’

‘I could set Ghost on him,’ said Charlie. Ghost was snarling almost continuously now, and drooling, and Charlie had taken a grip on his harness to restrain him.

‘Yes, but he could easily cut that poor girl’s throat before Ghost could bring him down.’

Jerry said, ‘Keep him talking. Maybe I can get a lucky shot in.’

‘But we cannot risk killing him,’ said Jamila. ‘What would happen to us if we did? We have no authority in whatever year this is. And anyway, we did *not* kill him, did we? Otherwise, that would have been mentioned in the history that you found.’

‘So what the hell are we going to do? It was definitely him who killed Kathleen Hartley, and we’ve found him. Don’t tell me we’re just going to walk off and let him get away with it.’

‘Two! *Three!*’ shouted Jasper Starke, in his rasping voice.

Instead of cutting the young woman’s throat, he lowered his knife and stabbed her in the stomach. She screamed, and tried desperately to wrestle herself free, but he wrapped his left arm around her neck, keeping her upright, while he sliced downwards through her apron, right down as far as her pelvis. Her apron was instantly soaked in blood, and it parted like two wet curtains as her intestines and her liver slid out of her and hung suspended in a jumble between her legs.

Jerry dodged to one side, and then the other, trying to get a shot at Jasper Starke, but Jasper Starke kept the young woman close to him, and began to drag her backwards between the stalls, her heels sliding on the tiles, leaving two trails of blood.

The stallholders and costermongers were shouting out in horror, and Ghost was leaping up and down and barking furiously. Jerry started to elbow his way through the crowd so that he could get behind Jasper Starke and shoot him in the back. But he had managed to push past only three stalls before there was a cry of ‘Rozzers!’

Two burly constables appeared, pushing the costermongers out of their way. They were wearing the tall custodian helmets and blue uniforms of the City Police, with red-and-white armbands, and they both had long wooden truncheons suspended from their belts.

They marched straight up to Jasper Starke, and without hesitation one of them beat him on the wrist with his truncheon so that he dropped his knife. The other took hold of the young woman, lifting her away from him and laying her carefully down on the floor. Her face was as white as wax and her arms and legs were limp, but all the same the constable called out, ‘Doctor! Somebody fetch a doctor!’

It was now so noisy in the market that when Jerry went back to join Jamila, he had to shout to make himself heard.

‘It’s no use us trying to collar him now!’ he said, holstering his pistol and buttoning up his coat. ‘This is what must have happened when he was nicked and locked up in Bishopsgate!’

Jamila had her hand pressed over her mouth, as if she were trying to stop herself from vomiting. She nodded, and then she took her hand away and said, 'You are right. I am just wondering if we are responsible for what he has done to that poor young girl. If we had not come here, he would not have stabbed her. And we know that he will escape from Bishopsgate, the same as those other two escaped from us!'

Charlie came up to them, yanking on Ghost's lead to make him follow him. Ghost was still straining to go after Jasper Starke, repeatedly snarling and jumping up onto his hind legs. He had no way of knowing that the two men who were holding Jasper Starke were police officers, and that Jasper Starke was already under arrest.

'The best thing we can do is get out of here,' said Jamila. 'Look – there are more police coming, and they will probably want to know what we are doing here, with a dog.'

'Right,' said Charlie. 'Come on, Ghost! Come on, boy! Dinnertime! That's my code word for "mission accomplished".'

They started to make their way back between the stalls. Very few stallholders took any notice of them. Their attention was all on the City police officers, and Jasper Starke and the young woman he had stabbed.

They reached the doors that led out onto the terrace. Charlie and Ghost went through first. Jerry hesitated, in case it was still 1880 outside. He looked at Jamila and he could tell that she was thinking the same. But then he turned around, and the market hall was empty, and silent. There were no stalls, no stallholders, no costermongers. The air no longer smelled of fish. The floor was still tiled in black and white, like a chessboard, but the tiles were polished and shiny.

Jamila stepped outside, and Jerry followed her. On the opposite side of the river, the Shard was shining, and he could see the lights on Tower Bridge. The only smell in the air was of petrol fumes.

'This is not going to work, is it?' said Jerry. 'We can't change history. It would be like us going back to dinosaur

times and trying to shoot a pterodactyl.’

‘We cannot change history because we *are* history,’ said Jamila, looking out over the river. ‘I honestly believe that we were really there, back in Victorian times, in Billingsgate Market, and that is why Jasper Starke was arrested. If anybody had owned a cine camera or a mobile phone in those days, and had filmed that, you would be able to see us.’

‘Maybe we were there. But what’s the point in us nicking all these villains and locking them up if they can simply go *poof!* and disappear. We might as well not bother.’

‘I agree with you, Jerry. We will have to go for the man who is causing all this disturbance. We have to go for Scratch.’

As they walked back to their car, Jerry said, ‘I feel pukish. Do you reckon there’s such a thing as time-travel sickness? If there is, I bet old Dr Who’s police box is awash with it.’

22

They called it a night. Jamila caught an Uber back to Redbridge and Jerry drove back to his flat in Tooting.

As he entered the hallway, Rachel's television was blaring so loudly that he gave her a knock. When she didn't answer, he opened the door and went into her living room. She was sitting fast asleep in her armchair with her mouth wide open and *Pimp My Ride* at top volume.

Jerry switched off her television. The living room was warm enough at the moment, but all the same he took the purple crochet throw off the back of the sofa and draped it over her, in case she didn't wake up until morning.

He looked around. He could vividly recall when the walls had been spattered with Nora's blood. Now they had been redecorated with mustard-coloured wallpaper.

Upstairs in his flat, he took a can of Tennent's out of the fridge, plonked himself down in front of his desk and switched on his PC. He was still feeling weird and disorientated after their excursion into Old Billingsgate, and he couldn't stop thinking about the gruesome way in which Jasper Starke had eviscerated that young woman. He was sure she must have died very shortly afterwards, and he wondered if there would be any way of finding out who she was.

She deserved some small memorial, or at least a mention in the fish market's history.

He checked his inbox. He had received at least a dozen emails, mostly with minor questions connected with his current cases, as well as a sarcastic message from his mother asking if he was still alive, and a reminder that his car

insurance was due for renewal. But then he saw that he had been sent one by Edward Dance, the jeweller. Edward had managed to acquire a sketch pad while he was in hospital, so that he could pencil a very detailed portrait of the woman who had so mysteriously appeared in his shop, and he had attached it.

Her coat was definitely 1940s style, with high padded shoulders. But it was her hairstyle that caught Jerry's attention the most – those two large rolls. He remembered how Adele had described the woman who had been Scratch's housekeeper, Veronica – 'she was tall, with funny rolled-up hair'.

He googled women's vintage hairstyles, and almost immediately found a style that exactly matched Edward Dance's drawing. It was a 'victory roll' and had been popular between 1940 and 1945 as a way of showing support for the men in uniform during the war.

He sat back. What if the woman who robbed Edward Dance had been Veronica? And what if the man who stabbed him – the Back Stabber – had been another member of Scratch's gang of murderers?

He made a video call to Jamila. She was in her kitchen, waiting for her microwaved supper to ping. He showed her Edward Dance's picture and reminded her about Adele's description of Veronica.

'Of course, it is too late to disturb young Adele now,' said Jamila. 'But we should go back to the Coopers first thing tomorrow and show her that picture. If she *is* the same woman, then perhaps we can arrange for Ghost to go to the jeweller's shop and pick up her scent.'

'But what if it is her, and Ghost tracks her down, and she's in 1941? Do we go after her, like we did with Jasper Starke? That was the middle of the Blitz, 1941.'

'Honestly, Jerry, I cannot say. In this investigation, it is useless to make predictions or assumptions. We can only take it one step at a time.'

‘Well, I suppose you’re right, Sarge. But I never thought the time would come when the very sound of the word “time” would give me the shivering willies.’

*

The next morning, at the Coopers’ house, Adele stared at Edward’s portrait for more than a quarter of a minute, biting her lower lip. Jamila couldn’t work out if she wasn’t sure that she recognised this woman, or if she did recognise her, and was too distressed by the sight of her to speak.

‘Well?’ she asked gently. ‘Is it anything like that Veronica woman who took you in?’

Adele looked back at her mother, who was standing close behind her, and then nodded. ‘It is her. That’s exactly what she looks like. Exactly.’

‘That is a great help to us, thank you,’ said Jamila.

‘Will it make it any easier for you to find Archie?’ asked her mother.

‘We sincerely hope so, Mrs Cooper. We are beginning to believe that many of these investigations are connected to each other. We are also beginning to believe that we know who might be behind all of them, and that this same individual is keeping Archie. He may be holding him as a hostage, but he may also be expecting him to carry on stealing for him. He is a kind of a Fagin.’

‘This Scratch person, do you mean? Adele told us all about him.’

‘Yes. That is the individual we are talking about. And this Veronica woman keeps house for him, as I expect Adele mentioned to you.’

‘There’s something I forgot to tell you about Veronica,’ said Adele. ‘I don’t know if it’s any use, but she told us that her second name was Crawford – Veronica Crawford.’

‘Really? That could be very useful indeed.’

‘But she also said that she got on people’s nerves, because she was always nagging them, and so everybody called her

Veronica Vex.’

‘Veronica Vex? All right. We will look into that. Is there anything else you remember, which you may not have told us before?’

‘Only her scent. I don’t know what it was, but I’ll never forget what it smelled like. It was like too many roses, mixed with sick.’

*

Jamila and Jerry went to the canteen at Lavender Hill for tea and coffee and a late breakfast. Jamila had vegan puff pastry slices with maple syrup and tomato while Jerry opted for scrambled eggs on toast.

‘Scrambled?’ said Jerry, poking at them with his fork. ‘More like beaten into submission.’

‘We can start by trying to find any mention of this Veronica Crawford, or Veronica Vex. If she irritated so many people, perhaps someone has mentioned her somewhere.’

‘Well, we’ll know if we find her, if she smells like roses and sick. That probably means she’s been time-travelling too.’

‘What we did, Jerry, that was not really time-travelling. We were simply stepping into a parallel world that is always there. Ghost is aware of that, because he was raised by a medium, and that is all that mediums do. They do not summon dead people from heaven, or some kind of afterlife. They call them from the parallel world in which they are still living.’

‘You’re giving me the creeps, you are. What you’re saying is that my grandpa’s still alive, for instance? He was the grumpiest old bastard who ever contaminated a room with pipe smoke, I can tell you. You reckon he’s still there somewhere, puffing away and being racist?’

Jamila looked up from her eggs and Jerry saw a glint in her eyes that he had never seen before. ‘You like an occasional cigarette,’ she said. ‘But at least you do not call me a Paki.’

They finished their breakfast and went back up to their office. Edge was already there, waiting for them. He had some

new information about the brutal murder of Mrs Lilian Ferris, Sabina's mother.

'That detached head that young Sabina was talking to, up in her attic – we went through the council records and we're pretty sure we've sussed out who it was. When that was a block of flats, number 12 was occupied by a disabled war casualty, name of Terence Wakefield.'

'He told her he'd been wounded at Dunkirk, didn't he?'

'Yes. The MoD helped us to locate Terence Wakefield's military records and he *was* wounded at Dunkirk.'

Edge held up his phone and read from the information that had been sent from the Ministry of Defence.

'He was in the Third Infantry Division, which was part of the British Expeditionary Force. He received severe injuries to his spine when the Germans were shelling the beach. After he'd been evacuated back to England, he was treated at Netley military hospital near Southampton, and he was there for several months. He never recovered the ability to walk and he was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.'

'Yes. Sabina told us that, didn't she?'

'There's more though. He might have been stuck in a wheelchair, but we've discovered that he was arrested in 1944 for attacking a woman by Clapham Common late one night and attempting to steal her handbag. According to the arrest details, she refused to give him her bag and he almost cut her hand off with a lino knife.'

'So now we know who we're looking for as a possible suspect,' said Jerry. 'Terence Wakefield, in a wheelchair. The trouble is, that block of flats was bombed during the war and doesn't exist any more, so we won't find him there. Not unless —'

Jamila flapped her hand. 'No, Jerry – I do not believe that there is any future in recruiting Ghost to track him down. It would only end up something like that nightmare at Billingsgate.'

'What *did* happen at Billingsgate?' Edge asked her.

‘We have to brief DCI Chance first,’ said Jamila. ‘Let me just say that it was a very strange encounter, and so far as this investigation is concerned, it got us precisely nowhere.’

Edge looked across at Jerry as if he expected him to elaborate, but Jerry shook his head. He and Jamila needed to come to terms with what had taken place in the fish market before they could explain it with any authority to anyone else. In a small corner at the back of his mind, Jerry was still wondering if he and Jamila and Charlie had somehow been sharing the same hallucination, or dreaming the same extraordinary dream.

He remembered once when he was very drunk being utterly convinced that he had arrested a father who had set fire to his daughter for marrying the wrong man, only to wake up and find himself lying on his kitchen floor, fully dressed. In reality, the father had flown off to Bangladesh, never to be seen again.

His old chief inspector back at Tooting had warned him that there were times when his job would seem unreal. He had been right – and that was before Jerry had been teamed up with Jamila to investigate cases that seemed to have elements of the supernatural.

*

It was Jamila who found the key that would eventually unlock the secret of number 9 St Oswald’s Place.

She had been sitting in front of her computer for nearly two hours, tapping at the keyboard and frowning. She was wearing glasses, which Jerry had never seen her wearing before, and he thought they made her look unexpectedly vulnerable. She was usually so self-assured that he found that vulnerability even more attractive. He could imagine taking her to the opticians and waiting for her while she had an eye test, or helping her to look for her mislaid glasses.

While Jamila was searching for any mention of Veronica Crawford, or Veronica Vex, Jerry was scrolling through hundreds of mug shots in the Metropolitan Police archive. The faces of the two men who had confronted him in the corridor were still fresh in his mind, and since there was a chance that

they might have been arrested at some time in the past, he was trying to see if he could identify them.

It was a depressing chore, enough to make anyone lose their faith in human nature. Almost all the offenders in the mug shots looked brutal, and ugly, and stupid, as if they had been hit on the head by half a brick.

He was still scrolling when Jamila took off her glasses and said, 'I have found her! You are not going to believe this!'

'You're kidding me. Really?'

Jerry stood up and went over to Jamila's desk. On her computer screen he saw a portrait of a pompous-looking man in a tailcoat and striped trousers, with his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. He wore rimless spectacles and his moustache was curled up at the ends, and he appeared to be well pleased with himself.

'This is extraordinary,' said Jamila. 'It is unbelievable how some incidents in history are totally forgotten, like Charles Dickens going to meet Scratch. I suppose it is because they are hard to believe, and they do not fit in with the popular idea of what actually happened.'

'So who's this gent?' Jerry asked her. 'He looks as if he's lost a quid and found a monkey, or else he's just had a bit of hanky-panky with his kitchen maid.'

'His name is Sir Frederick Treves. He was an eminent surgeon. He was famous for two things. He saved the life of King Edward VII two days before his coronation by draining his infected appendix. And he became close friends with Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man. He studied the Elephant Man and wrote a book about him and when he died he dissected him and took samples of his skin and his flesh.'

'I saw that film about the Elephant Man. Poor bloke. He was lumpy all over, wasn't he? Personally, I think he looked less like an elephant and more like ten kilos of boiled cauliflower. But what's this got to do with Veronica Vex?'

'It says here that Sir Frederick Treves first saw the Elephant Man being exhibited in a shop in the East End of London in

the year 1884. He visited him regularly and two years later he had him admitted to the London Hospital, to be taken care of there. And – look – here is an excerpt from Sir Frederick’s diaries. The Elephant Man’s name was Joseph but for some reason he always called him John.’

Jamila enlarged the text so that Jerry could read it more easily.

“‘When I arrived at the hospital last Wednesday morning, February 11th, I was approached by a woman who claimed to have information which I would find of considerable interest. She said that she was aware that John Merrick had now been admitted and that I was treating him. What was not generally known, she said, was that John Merrick was one of twins. After their mother had passed away when they were eleven years old, John was sent to live with his uncle Charles Merrick but his uncle refused to accept his twin brother, Matthew because, unlike John, who has the gentlest of dispositions, Matthew was uncontrollably aggressive and ill-behaved.’”

‘The Elephant Man had a twin brother?’ said Jerry, shaking his head. ‘Who in the world knew that?’

‘Just read on,’ Jamila told him.

“‘This woman said that her name was Veronica Crawford, and that her parents Mr and Mrs Crawford had been friends of the Merricks and had agreed to care for Matthew. At first Matthew showed no sign of deformity apart from his feet, but by the age of thirteen his deformity had rapidly grown more extreme, and by his sixteenth birthday his appearance was as monstrous as his brother John, if not more so.

“‘She said further that at Christmas 1879, both her parents and her sister had perished in a fire in their house in Leicester. Consequently, she and Matthew had travelled down to London in order for the two of them to make a living by Matthew exhibiting himself, in the same way that John had done. He would call himself the Rhinoceros Man, in order to profit from his brother’s fame. They became acquainted with a fellow called Breeze who was both a showman and a magician, and

Breeze had said that he could not only exhibit Matthew but teach him magic tricks.

“Unfortunately, Miss Crawford claimed, Matthew’s deformity had also made him increasingly sensitive to London’s smoke and fog, and to sunlight. He had eventually been forced to retreat into a darkened cellar, so she said, and so now he was unable to exhibit himself, and therefore earn sufficient money for himself and Miss Crawford to live on.

“If I were to give her five pounds, she said, she would take me to see him, and perhaps I could arrange for him to be installed at the London Hospital beside John. Of course I realised her request to be a deception and a fraud. John has never mentioned to me the existence of a twin brother, although he is aware that after his mother’s demise his father remarried and had two more children.

“I told Miss Crawford flatly that I did not believe her and that I was not prepared to listen to any more of her fraudulent concoctions. However, she reappeared at the hospital the following day, and the day after that, insisting that her story is true and repeating her appeal for money. She came again this morning and she has become so irritating that I have christened her Veronica Vex.”

‘So Sir Frederick didn’t believe her,’ said Jerry. ‘But *we* know she was telling the truth. Or mostly the truth, anyhow. So that’s who Scratch could be – Matthew Merrick. I wonder what would have happened if Sir Frederick had agreed to take him into the hospital, along with his brother?’

‘Who can say? But he cannot make money by showing himself off, like his brother used to, and that is almost certainly why he has formed a gang, and why he sends children out stealing.’

‘But what about this time-travelling thing, or this parallel world thing, whatever it is? How does he do that?’

‘That is what we will have to find out, Jerry. At least we know now who we are looking for, and that will help us to track him down, whatever world he is living in. It says here that Joseph Merrick’s skeleton is still preserved at St Bart’s

medical school, although it is not on public display, and that his soft tissue was buried in the City of London Cemetery.

‘Matthew Merrick’s DNA will closely match that of his long-dead twin. What we need to do now is to arrange for Ghost to pick up his scent.’

23

Charlie and Ghost were patiently waiting for them by the stone gateway of the City of London Cemetery.

‘I’ve been on some right weird investigations before, I can tell you,’ said Charlie, as they climbed out of their car and joined him. ‘But this one takes the biscuit.’

Ghost came trotting up to Jamila and Jerry with his tail furiously wagging and he appeared to be delighted to see them again.

‘I should have brought a ball for him,’ said Jerry. ‘More fun than sniffing dead people’s graves.’

‘You’d be wasting your time, Jerry. He’s right funny about balls. I’ve tried throwing one for him, but he wouldn’t go after it. He just stood there and stared at me, like he was saying, why should I chase it? It hasn’t committed any offence, has it?’

Jerry looked down at Ghost and shook his head. ‘I don’t know. I’m beginning to wonder if he’s a dog at all, or a bloke dressed up in a brown Labrador suit.’

Inside the gateway, they were met by the cemetery supervisor, a smart middle-aged man with red cheeks and a double-breasted blazer with gold buttons. He had something of a military bearing, as if he expected the occupants of his cemetery to keep quiet and behave themselves, especially when they had visitors.

He led them briskly to the communal graves on the far side of the cemetery where Joseph Merrick’s remains had been buried. They walked along the path between the trees and the flowerbeds, blindly watched by sad-looking angels carved out

of stone. For once, Ghost didn't pull at his lead, but kept his head raised and his tail down, as if he could sense the hundreds of spirits that were sleeping in their graves all around them.

Jamila thought that she had never been anywhere so tranquil. The only sound was the breeze in the trees and the distant splashing of a fountain.

'There's half a million people buried here,' the supervisor told them, as they walked. 'Some famous people among them. Bobby Moore, the England football captain, he's over there. And Winston Churchill's nanny. And Dame Anna Neagle, the actress. And two of Jack the Ripper's victims. And the chap who invented billiards.'

The Elephant Man's grave was in a quiet field-like part of the cemetery. It was marked only by a short white pillar with a polished granite plaque on top of it, which read *In Memoriam Joseph Merrick 1862-1890*.

'I don't know how on earth your dog's going to be able to pick up any scent,' said the supervisor. 'It was only Merrick's soft tissue that was buried here. His skeleton's still in the medical school at Queen Mary University. Perhaps you ought to arrange for him to have a sniff at that.'

'That occurred to us, actually,' said Jamila. 'Unfortunately, when we contacted the medical school, they told us that Joseph Merrick's bones were bleached after he was dissected, and so all of his original scent would have been obliterated.'

Charlie had led Ghost up to the grave marker, and now Ghost had his nose pressed against the base of it, taking deep snorting breaths.

'I'm not so sure we're going to have any luck here,' said Charlie, watching Ghost circle around and around, sniffing and then pausing, and then sniffing again, as if he was not at all sure what he could smell, or if he could smell anything. 'We don't know what kind of container his remains were buried in, do we, and he's been here nigh on a hundred and forty years.'

Jamila said, 'If Ghost cannot pick up any scent now, then we might have to apply for an exhumation order.'

'Well, let's hope not, shall we?' snapped the cemetery supervisor. It was clear that he was dead set against any occupant of his immaculate cemetery being dug up.

Ghost lifted his head. He appeared to be thinking. Then he resumed sniffing around the grave marker, taking in deeper and slower breaths than he had been before. After almost five minutes he lifted his head again, and this time he had that look in his eyes – that look that said, *I know who I'm going after. I have a picture of him in my head.*

'You think he will be able to identify You-Know-Who?' asked Jamila. She was careful not to mention the name 'Scratch' in front of the cemetery supervisor.

'Almost sure of it,' said Charlie. 'Look at him. He can't find a trail to follow directly from here, but he's done this kind of thing before. He knows we'll be taking him somewhere where there's a good chance that he might smell a similar smell. Twins don't always have exactly the same DNA, but it'll be close enough for Ghost to tell they're related.'

'I must say that's amazing,' said the cemetery supervisor. 'You mean to say that he has actually smelled Joseph Merrick's remains, even though they're under the ground?'

'He's got three hundred million olfactory receptors in his nose,' said Charlie. 'Do you know how many us poor humans have got? Six million. When it comes to smelling, there's no contest.'

*

Before they set out to find Scratch, they returned to the station to collect their firearms. Jamila suggested that they also take Tasers, in case Scratch put up a fight. They knew now that Matthew Merrick was even more grossly deformed than his brother Joseph, but they had no idea how much, or if his deformities might make it difficult for them to arrest him. They had examined some of the photographs of Joseph

Merrick and it was clear that his wrists would have been far too lumpy to fit handcuffs on him.

‘Are you sure you are ready for this?’ asked Jamila, tucking her automatic into her holster.

‘Talk about *Back to the Future*,’ said Jerry. ‘Do you think we should try and take some backup with us?’

‘Let us see how this goes. We do not know if Ghost will try to lead us back to 1941. Or, if he does, how many people he is able to take with him. Apart from that, before we set out, we would have to explain the whole concept of parallel worlds to any officers who were going to come with us.’

‘Yeah, you’re right. That wouldn’t exactly be a piece of cake, would it? If I hadn’t found fish scales all over my coat, I must admit I would have found it almost impossible to believe we actually visited Billingsgate in 1880. So I can imagine trying to convince half a dozen uniforms that we’re going to go back to the Blitz. Or *through* to the Blitz, or whatever. They’d be like, “Duh?”’

Jamila’s phone rang, and it was Charlie. He had arrived outside with Ghost in an unmarked dog van, and he was asking if they were ready to go.

They drove to Kennington and parked around the corner from St Oswald’s Place. Some boys were playing football in the middle of the road, but Jamila considered that they were far enough away from number 9 to be safe, and that she would not have to tell them to go and play somewhere else. Besides, even if Ghost led them back to 1941, these boys would still be kicking their ball around in the present day. They would be unaware that when Jamila and Jerry and Charlie and Ghost had disappeared, they had not gone round the corner but through to Kennington as it existed during the Second World War.

Ghost was eagerly tugging at his harness, and Jerry guessed that the scent he had picked up from Joseph Merrick’s grave was still tingling in his three hundred million olfactory receptors. He led them along St Oswald’s Place until they

came again to the yard with its line of dustbins where number 9 had once stood.

‘Now what?’ said Jerry. ‘This must have been where Matthew Merrick used to hang out, before the building was bombed, but he’s not here now, is he?’

Ghost was facing the gate, his head raised, and he started to quiver. He began to growl too, in the back of his throat, the kind of growl that dogs give when they are warning off intruders.

‘He can smell that he’s near,’ said Charlie.

‘Yes, but where?’ Jamila asked him. ‘Maybe the cellar where he used to hide is still here, beneath this paving, and maybe he is still in it, but there is no access to it. He cannot get out and we cannot get in. Not unless we get permission to dig it all up.’

Ghost continued to quiver and growl. As the seconds went by, his quivering grew more and more intense, until he was shaking, and his growling became so throaty that Jerry thought he was going to choke. His fur was bristling as if he had been struck by lightning.

Charlie knelt down beside him and put his arm around him.

‘Come on, boy. Where is he? You can smell him, can’t you? You can bloody well smell him? But where is he?’

Jerry blinked, and then blinked again. Gradually, the light was fading, and St Oswald’s Place was growing dark.

‘*Svarga!* It is happening!’ said Jamila, looking around. ‘He is taking us through. Look – the boys have gone. They have not yet been born. And look at the trees, how they are shrinking. They are actually *shrinking!* We are going back.’

The street became darker and darker. In the distance, sirens began to wail, and searchlights started to criss-cross the sky like lightsabers.

Ghost let out a high-pitched bark that was almost a scream, and Charlie said, ‘God almighty.’

The yard in front of them slowly disappeared behind a thick grey fog, but within only a few seconds the fog had cleared away, and in its place a three-storey brick building had materialised, with a black metal doorway.

‘I think we’re back, folks,’ said Charlie, although he sounded shaken, and unsure what to do next. Off to the east side of London, in the direction of the docks, they heard the loud moaning of aircraft and the intermittent *crump!* of bombs exploding.

Ghost went right up to the black metal door. He sniffed at it, and then he stood up on his hind legs and started to scrape at it.

Jerry pushed against the door but it was firmly locked.

‘Should have brought a boshier,’ he said, meaning an Enforcer battering ram. ‘I suppose we’ll just have to knock and see if anybody’s home.’

Jamila looked up at the searchlights. ‘Let us hope tonight is not the night when this building was bombed.’

Jerry knocked at the door and waited. There was no response from inside, so he knocked again, even harder.

‘Anybody in?’ he shouted. ‘I said – is there anybody in?’

About half a minute passed. It sounded as if the bombers were coming closer, and they could hear the penny-whistling and crackling of anti-aircraft guns firing. The sky above them was dotted with floating clouds of flak, like dandelion puffs.

Jerry was about to knock a third time when the door suddenly opened up. The hallway was in darkness, but there was enough light coming from the far end for them to be able to see the silhouette of a tall thin woman with large victory rolls in her hair.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded. ‘What do you want?’

Ghost tried to scramble past her, but Charlie held him back.

Jamila said, ‘We are police officers, ma’am. Am I right in thinking that you are Veronica Crawford?’

‘What if I am? There’s an air raid going on, in case you hadn’t noticed! What the hell are you after in the middle of an air raid?’

‘We need to come in,’ Jamila told her.

‘Why? I haven’t done anything.’

‘We need to ask you some questions, Ms Crawford,. If you don’t let us in, you’ll be guilty of obstruction.’

At that moment, from somewhere at the end of the hallway, they heard children arguing, and laughing, and then the sound of plates clattering.

‘Right,’ said Jamila. ‘We are coming in, whether you like it or not.’

With that, she stepped forward and took hold of Veronica’s arm.

‘Let *go* of me!’ Veronica demanded, but Jamila pushed her along the hallway, their shoes crunching on broken glass and splinters of window frame.

Jerry and Charlie followed. Jerry closed the front door behind him, but just in case they needed to make an emergency exit, with or without Scratch, he left it an inch ajar. Ghost was panting and shivering even more frantically now, and when he reached the cellar door he shuddered as if he were having a sexual climax, and he pressed his nose to the narrow crack underneath it, drawing the smell deep into his lungs.

‘I said, let *go* of me!’ Veronica repeated. ‘I promise you – are *so* going to regret this!’

Jamila took no notice and forced Veronica in through the kitchen door. Eight or nine young children were sitting around the table, girls as well as boys. Some of the children were still eating what looked like corned-beef hash and boiled potatoes, while three of them were standing by the sink, scraping their plates and running tap water over them. A diminutive old woman in a brown felt hat and a long apron was standing in front of the gas cooker, stirring a saucepan with a wooden spoon. She turned and looked at Jamila and Jerry as they came

into the kitchen, but she showed no particular interest in finding out who they were, and she went back to her stirring.

‘Have you nearly finished?’ Veronica called out to the children. ‘As soon as you have finished you must all go down into the cellar.’

The brindled cat was sitting on the draining board, and it gave Jamila and Jerry a hostile stare. When it caught sight of Ghost outside in the hallway, its ears flattened and it let out an aggressive mewl.

‘I have no idea what you’re expecting to find,’ said Veronica. ‘We’re all as pure as the driven snow, us lot. And you don’t *look* like coppers, none of you. Is this some sort of a joke?’

Jamila took out her ID card and held it up in front of Veronica’s face. ‘Is this proof enough for you?’

Veronica deliberately turned and looked the other way. ‘I’m not interested, my darling. Just tell me what you want and then you can all buzz off and leave us in peace – you and that snivelling hound of yours.’

It was then, though, that a boy in a grubby grey jumper finished his plate of hash and stood up among the other children at the end of the table. Both Jamila and Jerry recognised him instantly as Archie.

‘Archie!’ called Jamila. ‘Archie, come here!’

Archie was so startled that he dropped his spoon. As he picked it up, he looked over at Veronica, and it was obvious that he was terrified of her.

‘Archie, we’ve come to take you back to your dad and your mum, and Adele!’

‘What are you talking about?’ Veronica demanded. ‘Archie – you stay where you are, if you know what’s good for you!’

Archie hesitated, but Jerry said, ‘Put a sock in it, love! Come on, Archie! We’re going to get you out of here.’

He turned to Veronica. ‘It’s not only Archie we’ve come for, if you must know. It’s a certain Matthew Merrick, alias

Scratch, if we've got that right. We're presuming he's down in the cellar, in the dark. Maybe you'd like to be co-operative and take us down there to meet him?'

Veronica gave him a look that 'would have killed a werewolf', as Jerry's late grandfather would have described it.

Instead of answering, she leaned back towards the open kitchen door and shrieked out, 'Ronnie! Roger! Starkey! I need your help down here!'

24

‘Come on, Ms Crawford,’ said Jamila. ‘We do not want any more trouble than necessary.’

But a man’s hoarse voice called down from somewhere upstairs. ‘Vexy? What’s the problem, sweet’ear?’

‘There’s intruders, Roger! They say they’re coppers but I don’t believe them! They want to take Archie! And they want to go down the cellar too!’

‘Be right with you, Vexy.’

An avalanche of heavy shoes came thundering down the uncarpeted stairs. Ghost barked and leapt up as three big men barged along the hallway and shouldered their way in through the kitchen door.

‘Right!’ snapped the shortest of them. ‘What the fuck’s goin’ on ’ere, may I ask?’ He had shiny Brylcreemed hair and a camel-coloured coat. When he stepped into the light, Jerry saw that he was the same man who had pulled that .45 automatic on him in the corridor of Lavender Hill police station.

‘We are police officers,’ said Jamila, trying to keep her voice steady.

Neither she nor Jerry could have failed to recognise the man standing close behind him, with his walrus moustache and his self-satisfied grin. It was Jasper Starke, the same Fishmonger they had last seen gutting sea bream and then a young oyster-wife. Close beside loomed the other man who had attempted to abduct Jerry – tall and wide-shouldered, with a broken nose.

‘They say they want to take Archie away, and then go down to see Scratch,’ said Veronica, giving Jamila and Jerry a

vindictive stare.

‘What? We can’t have that, can we? ’Ere – ’oo d’you think you are, eh? Comin’ in ’ere, right in the middle of a fuckin’ air-raid, not so much as by-your-leave? You can get back out there, quick as you fuckin’ like, and I hope you all get blown to microscopic bits!’

Both Jamila and Jerry drew out their pistols, and cocked them. Jamila waved hers impatiently and said, ‘You will back away, all three of you, while Ms Crawford accompanies us down to the cellar. You will do nothing to hinder us from seeing Scratch, or whatever he calls himself.’

‘You won’t be able to see ’im, you stupid bitch. ’E lives in the dark. ’E ’as to. Otherwise ’e’d die of sorey arses, or somethin’ like that.’

‘That’s a pity,’ said Jerry, taking his mini Imalent flashlight out of his coat pocket and switching it on. Instantly, the whole kitchen was lit with 65,000 lumens – so bright that it looked like a film set. The children all stood there bewildered, turning their heads this way and that, with their mouths open.

‘You can’t shine *that* on ’im, you prick!’ the short man protested. ‘’E’ll fuckin’ kill you, if you try!’

‘We will see about that,’ said Jamila. ‘We are going to go down to see him, and then we will leave, with or without him, but certainly with Archie. Just stay here for a short while, Archie, and then we will take you home.’

Jamila was about to nudge Veronica out of the kitchen door and into the hallway when the short man snapped his fingers. Without a word, Jasper Starke came out from behind him, and waded through the children like a teacher making his way through a third-form PE class, his hands on their shoulders to move them to one side.

Jerry could see that he was heading towards Archie, so he pointed his pistol directly at him and said, ‘Stop! Stop where you are, Starke!’

Jasper Starke ignored Jerry and looked back at the short man with a grin that was even wider than usual, baring his

brown and gappy teeth.

‘E knows my name, would ye believe? ‘Ow does ’e know my name?’

Because I’ve seen your mug shot from 1880, you murderous bastard, and I’ve seen you cut open a young woman with my own eyes. And if I really thought that I could get away with shooting you here and now, and I thought that it wouldn’t upset all these kids, I would happily blow your brains all over the kitchen calendar for 1941 that’s hanging right behind you.

Without any hesitation, though, Jasper Starke ducked down and sideways and dragged Archie towards him. At the same time, he drew a ten-inch fish-slicing knife out of his belt and held it across Archie’s throat.

‘There,’ said the short man, with undisguised satisfaction. He looked at his wristwatch. ‘I’d say it was high time for you three numpties and that slobbery pooch of yours to say goodnight Vienna , don’t you?’

‘You must let him go,’ said Jamila. ‘He is a young boy. A child. You cannot threaten the life of a child like that.’

Jasper Starke looked down at Archie and gave him a smile. ‘One life ain’t no different from the next, I’m sorry to tell you. A child, a woman. A sinner or a priest. Ain’t you never seen a child’s insides? You can now, if you fancy it! They’re the same as anyone else’s, only smaller!’

Five slow seconds passed in which the mounting tension in the kitchen made Jerry feel as if the air was becoming as dense as glass, so that they could see everything with supreme clarity, but none of them were able to move. Jasper Starke continued to give that lascivious smirk, as if he were thoroughly enjoying himself, more than he could ever admit, while Archie’s eyes were bulging in panic. All the children were staring in horror at the knife that Jasper Starke was holding across Archie’s throat – so close and so sharp that it had already nicked him, and drops of blood had stained the neck of his sweater.

The old woman in the brown hat stopped stirring. She was standing with her wooden spoon held up over her saucepan and sago pudding dripping off it, *drip-drip-drip*, as if counting the seconds to the time when they could all breathe again.

As the last drip fell, Jamila lowered her gun. ‘Let us get out of here,’ she said. ‘Charlie – Ghost will have to be disappointed today, I am sorry to say. But he will still deserve a bone.’

She holstered her pistol and walked out of the kitchen door. Charlie and Ghost followed her, and Jerry came behind Charlie. As he went along the hallway, Jerry repeatedly glanced over his shoulder, keeping his pistol raised in case any of the three men tried to attack them from behind.

They opened the front door wide and walked out into the darkness and the distant crumping of bombs. Searchlights were still flicking from one side of the sky to the other, although the anti-aircraft guns were firing only sporadically now, so Jerry assumed that the main wave of enemy bombers had passed over.

Jamila turned around and said, ‘Are we stuck here? Charlie? Where is Ghost?’

But even as she turned, the sky began to lighten, and the droning of aircraft faded away. Silently, but quickly, the trees that lined St Oswald’s Place began to grow, their branches spreading higher and wider.

They heard traffic, and then the sound of a football being kicked, and a boy shouting out, ‘Foul! That is *such* a foul! Yellow card, Lewis!’

By the time Jerry turned around, the building that had been number 9 had disappeared. Its black metal door had gone, its three storeys of grimy brick frontage had evaporated. All he could see in its place was the gate, and the patio, and the row of dustbins.

Ghost was standing next to him with his tongue hanging out, panting hard. He looked so exhausted that Jerry could

almost believe he had run all the way from 1941 to the present day.

Charlie reached into his pocket and gave Ghost a Grub Club.

‘For one moment, there, Jerry, I thought we were stuck there for the rest of our lives. Can you imagine, stuck forever in a time with no telly? They closed down telly during the war, didn’t they, in case the signals guided the German bombers.’

Jerry looked back at the space where number 9 had stood. Jesus, he thought. I actually heard those three men running down those stairs, but there are no stairs there, only sky. He felt completely unreal, as if all he wanted to do now was find the nearest pub and order himself several stiff JDs.

They walked back to their car and Charlie’s van.

‘So what’s the plan now?’ asked Charlie, after Ghost jumped aboard and he had closed the doors.

‘I do not know,’ Jamila told him. ‘At least we are sure now that Scratch is in that cellar and that Archie is in the house too. We need to devise a way in which we can rescue Archie unharmed and stop Scratch bringing these villains like Jasper Starke from out of the past.’

‘What about all those other kids? There must have been nearly a dozen of them.’

‘Again, I do not know any more than you do. We have no idea who they are or where they came from. If they came from another time, apart from this one, there would be no record of them having gone missing, would there?’

They started to drive back to Lavender Hill.

‘There’s something else that’s doing my head in,’ said Jerry. ‘If we hadn’t gone back to 1880, to Billingsgate Market, Jasper Clarke wouldn’t have murdered that poor girl and he wouldn’t have got himself arrested. But we did, and he did. He disappeared out of his cell afterwards, but we still went to Billingsgate. Like you said – if somebody there had owned a camera, and you didn’t have to sit still for ten minutes in those days to have your picture taken, they could have taken a photo

of us. And if it had survived, it would still be possible to see that picture now.'

'I know what you are saying, Jerry. You are saying that today we were really in 1941, and that somebody with a cine camera could have filmed us there.'

'Yes, Sarge, but no. I'm saying more than that. What if we've already caught Scratch, but that's all in the past? We wouldn't need to bother to go after him now, would we? Number 9 got bombed – supposing the bomb went right down into the cellar and killed him?'

They parked outside the station and went back up to their office. 'You are getting yourself into a muddle,' said Jamila, perching herself on the edge of her desk. 'I know these different worlds are confusing, but they are not the same as time travel. They are not like H. G. Wells or Doctor Who. Time is both linear and parallel. Yes, we really did go to Billingsgate in 1880 – and yes, today we really did go Kennington in 1941. But if you can understand it, we are still there, and we always have been there, and we always will be.'

'But, do me a favour. That must mean that there's more than one of me. There's me here and now, but there are millions of other mes. I'm still doing what I was doing yesterday, and the day before, and in 1941, and that was before I was even a twinkle in my dad's left testicle.'

'You want the simple answer to that, Jerry? The answer is "yes".'

'But what if Ghost takes us into some parallel world and I accidentally bump into me?'

'You cannot. And you will not. Because there is only one you.'

'Jesus. And you wonder why this is doing my head in?'

Jerry sat down and stared at his blank PC screen as if he expected some comedian to appear and tell him a joke that would make sense of what had happened at number 9. He felt overwhelmingly guilty for having left Archie in the hands of Veronica and those thugs. At the same time, he was convinced

that if he had pulled the trigger – even if he had blown Jasper Starke’s brains out – the risk of him cutting Archie’s throat would have still been far too high.

No comedian appeared when he switched on his PC. Instead, he had received an email from the Martian. His forensic technicians had identified the fingerprints that had been lifted from the .45 automatic that Jerry had kicked out of the hands of the man who had tried to abduct him.

His name is Roger Welkin, commonly called The Whelk. Between 1936 and 1952, he and his brother Donald ran a criminal gang based in Battersea known as the Battersea Bastards, mostly engaged in robbery and protection rackets. From 1938 to 1940 he lived at the same address in Bolingbroke Grove as Kenneth Treagus, his victim. In November of 1940 his house was bombed. He was in Brighton at the time of the bombing, meeting some of the criminal gangs there, so he was unharmed, but his wife and his 11-year-old son were killed.

Once he had read the Martian’s message, Jerry read it out to Jamila, as well as forwarding it to her.

‘So do we know what happened to him?’ asked Jamila. ‘He must be deceased by now, surely, unless he has had a telegram from the Palace.’

Jerry rang the Martian. ‘Del? It’s Jerry. Just read your update about Roger Welkin. Do you happen to know if he’s still with us?’

‘Oh, sorry,’ said the Martian. ‘I forgot to add that The Whelk was shot dead by a rival gang member in... let me have a look here... It was January 1952. Apparently he was invited to a birthday party in Clapham that didn’t turn out to be a birthday party at all, but an execution – his. They tied him to a chair and forced a shotgun muzzle into his mouth and pulled the trigger. Kurt Cobain’s garage wasn’t in it, judging by the photos I’ve retrieved from the file. And nobody ever found out who’d done it.’

‘So we’re really sure that it was him who shot Kenneth Treagus, even though he was killed in 1952?’

‘I’m not saying we’ve got cast-iron proof, Jerry. All I’m telling you is that the fingerprints on the automatic were his, and nobody else’s. But whoever you’ll be looking for, it won’t

be him. He's in Mortlake Cemetery, in case you want to dig him up to make sure.'

Jerry tossed his phone back onto his desk.

'Dead people are murdering living people,' he said. 'And they're not shuffling along the street with one eye and one ear and their arse hanging out of their trousers, like zombies. We've already met The Fishmonger, and today we met The Whelk. God knows who we're going to bump into next. The King Prawn, probably.'

'But Jerry – now we know who blinded that shopkeeper. The fingerprints on the plastic screen in the shop belonged to the brother of the man who shot Kenneth Treagus, and since that was Roger Welkin, it must have been Donald Welkin.'

'Exactly. And he must be brown bread too.'

25

Martin was sitting on the terrace of the Skylark Café on Wandsworth Common, sipping his coffee and trying to solve the *Daily Telegraph* cryptic crossword, when his six-year-old daughter, Flicky, came running up to him, with her friend Davina.

‘Daddy! Daddy! There’s a dead boy on the swings!’

Martin lowered his paper and gave her a snort of disbelief.

‘I don’t think so, darling. I think he’s probably having a nap, that’s all.’

‘No, Daddy! He’s dead! He’s got this huge hole right between his eyes and the back of his head is missing! You can see his brains all over the ground!’

Martin could see now that Flicky was desperately shocked and upset. Both she and Davina had tears running down their cheeks. Their fists were tightly clenched and they were trembling.

Two middle-aged women who had the appearance of off-duty nurses looked over at him from another table, and he gave them a sickish smile. Then he stood up and took Flicky’s hand and let her guide him to the playground, which was only a little more than fifty yards away. The two swing sets were on the far side and to reach them they had to make their way around the seesaw and the roundabout and the slide. Four of the swings had plain seats for older children, but four had wooden chairs for toddlers.

A boy of about nine years old was sitting slumped sideways in one of the toddler chairs. He was wearing a grey jumper and shorts and grey socks, and only one sandal.

Flicky was right. He had a circular hole in the middle of his forehead, and when Martin cautiously circled around behind him, he could see that the back half of the boy's skull was missing. His brains were clinging in custard-coloured blobs to the back of his jumper, as well as having been sprayed in a fan shape across the black rubber flooring behind the swings.

The boy's eyes were open, and he was staring across the playground as if he were trying to think where he was, and what had happened to him.

Martin looked around. It was still early, and there were only two other children in the playground, and they were laughing and bouncing up and down on the rocking horse. In the near distance, though, he could see a woman walking at least four dogs.

'Flicky – Davina – you two go back to the café. Davina – I'll get in touch with your mummy and see if she can come and pick you up. I'm going to call the police but I'd better stay here until they arrive to make sure that nobody disturbs this poor boy.'

He didn't say, *We don't want dogs licking his brains from the ground, do we?* – although he was thinking it, as the woman dog-walker came closer.

As it was, the woman and her dogs walked off in the opposite direction, and the two children who had been riding the rocking horse suddenly jumped off it and ran away. Martin was left alone with the dead boy, with no sound but the traffic on Trinity Road, and an airliner flying overhead on its way to land at Heathrow.

He glanced once or twice at the boy, just to make sure no magpies were fluttering down to peck at his brains. It was hard to look at him though, His eyes were milking over, but the expression on his face was so sad. Martin thought: who would shoot such a young boy, and what for? He had his whole life ahead of him, but now all those schooldays and sports and girlfriends and work would never happen.

In less than five minutes, a police car with blue flashing lights appeared in the road that bordered the common. An

officer jumped out to open the gates in the metal fence, and then the police car came speeding over the grass to the playground.

Martin went forward to meet them. Two uniformed constables climbed out of their car and approached him, putting on their caps as they came.

‘Mr Spearing?’

Martin nodded, and pointed over his shoulder in the direction of the swings.

‘He’s dead, no doubt about that. It looks like somebody’s shot him. He’s only a kid. Why in the name of God would anyone want to kill a young kid?’

*

It was early afternoon when Jamila’s phone rang. It was Simon Fairbrother, and he said he had some bad news for her.

‘I am not surprised. When this phone rings, it is never good news. I am seriously thinking of upgrading it.’

Simon paused for a moment, but of course she was unable to hear what he was thinking. *It sounds to me like she’s been teamed up with that Jerry Pardoe once too often. That’s just the kind of thing that he would say, except he’d sprinkle it with a few choice swear words.*

‘We’ve found Archie Cooper.’

‘You have found him? Where?’

‘Wandsworth Common playground. On the swings. I’m sorry to say that he’s deceased.’

‘When you say deceased—?’

‘Somebody’s shot him in the head. Blown his brains out. The forensics are here now and they’ve just put up a tent.’

‘Oh, that is terrible. I can hardly believe it. Have you informed his parents?’

‘Yes... but before we ask them to make a formal identification, we’ll be taking him to the morgue at St

George's. No parent should have to see their child looking like this.'

Jamila covered her phone with her hand and mouthed the words at Jerry, 'Archie has appeared. He is dead. Simon says that he has been shot.'

Jerry had taken only two bites out of his cheese-and-tomato sandwich, but now put it down.

'What? Shot? Where? Holy shit. His mum and dad are going to be crucified. And Adele.'

He looked up at the ceiling and said bitterly, 'Hey! If you're really real, up there, how can you let a nine-year-old boy get murdered? Doing something else at the time, were you? Out playing golf in the clouds?'

'*Jerry*,' said Jamila, but there was a softness in her tone of voice that made him feel that she understood his bitterness, even if she would never blaspheme herself. She knew that he had never believed in God, and that he was ranting only at fate, and how inexplicably cruel life could be.

'He is in the playground on Wandsworth Common. We should get out there to see him before he is moved.'

'But how the hell did he get there?' asked Jerry, as he followed her downstairs. He was fighting with his jacket because one of the sleeves was inside out. 'Yesterday he was at number 9, in 1941, still alive. Today he's on Wandsworth Common, and he's dead.'

'I think we both know that Scratch is the answer to that,' said Jamila. 'He can move people from one parallel world to the other, just like Ghost can move us.'

She opened the driver's door of their unmarked Volvo. 'I will drive today. You are too steamed up. When you drive and you are steamed up, you scare the life out of me.'

*

Inside the blue forensic tent, the Martian was waiting for them, and Molly Something was taking photographs. This time, she acknowledged Jerry with a little finger-wave.

‘Almost point-blank, I’d say,’ said the Martian, as they stared at Archie leaning sideways in his swing chair. ‘And while you were on your way here, Yong our ballistics expert found the bullet that killed him. It was lodged in the trunk of that horse-chestnut tree over there. Yong – do you want to show DS Patel and DC Pardoe that FMJ round you dug out?’

A short Korean man in a mask came forward and held up an evidence bag with a partially flattened bullet inside it.

‘It’s a .45 ACP round, with a full metal jacket. Exactly the same as the bullet that killed Kenneth Treagus and the same as the bullet that we recovered from the skirting board at Lavender Hill.’

‘But it couldn’t have been fired from the same gun,’ said Jerry. ‘You still have that in the lab, don’t you?’

‘Yes, of course. But it’s possible that this round was fired from another Colt automatic. It’s unlikely, I have to admit, but it could have been another weapon from the same wartime consignment, stolen at the same time.’

Jerry hunkered down in front of the swings and looked at Archie. His hazel-coloured eyes, gradually misting over. The mole on his upper lip.

Jerry wished so much that he had shot Jasper Starke back at number 9. Of course there had been a high risk that Starke would have cut Archie’s throat, but Jerry was a good shot and at least Archie would have stood a chance.

Here – jammed into this toddler’s swing – he had been given no chance at all. Every dream that he had ever dreamed, every song that he had ever learned to sing, everything that had ever made him laugh, they were all spattered here, on this black rubber flooring, and lost for ever.

‘Right,’ said the Martian. ‘Are we ready to lift him out now?’

Jerry stood up and took three or four paces back, so that two forensic investigators could stand on either side of the swing. They took hold of Archie under his arms, and inch by inch

they tugged him up out of the chair, with the Martian lifting his legs so that they wouldn't be trapped underneath the bar.

They laid him on a stretcher, and as they did so, Jerry saw a folded piece of paper protruding from his trouser pocket. He was not wearing nitrile gloves himself, but he nudged the Martian, and pointed to it, and the Martian pulled out the piece of paper.

He unfolded it, and when he looked over the Martian's shoulder Jerry saw that there was large scrawly writing on it, in blue ink.

It read, *You Scratch my back & I'll Scratch yours.*

*

'This changes everything,' said Jamila.

After Archie had been taken away in an ambulance, she and Jerry had walked over to the Skylark Café for a tea and a coffee and a talk. They were both finding it hard to erase the image of Archie from their minds.

'Well, there's no question that Scratch is warning us off. That note couldn't have meant anything else, could it? Jesus. When those two goons came looking for me at the station, I bet I would have had my brains blown out too, if I'd given them half a chance.'

'I believe that you and I are still in considerable danger,' said Jamila. 'I know plenty of gang leaders like Scratch and I expect you do too. They are paranoid about their own safety, and they will not stop until they have eliminated everybody who represents a threat to them.'

'But to kill young Archie, that was unforgivable. He didn't represent any kind of threat.'

'No. But it sent us a very powerful message. That is why his murder changes everything. Before, we had decided that we could ignore Scratch's gang and go for Scratch himself. That was because we knew we could not keep his gang members locked up. We would arrest them but they would simply vanish.'

‘So what are you suggesting? We can go after them, and maybe with Ghost to help us, we can find them, like we found Jasper Starke, and we can nick them. But if they can disappear out of their cells, what’s the effing point?’

Jamila tipped more sugar into her tea. ‘We cannot tell anybody about this, except for Charlie, because he will have to know. DCI Chance must never find out. But we do not arrest them. We become summary executioners. We kill them.’

Jerry sat back, frowning. ‘Hang on. How can we kill them if they’re dead already? Starke must have died sometime in the 1890s. We know that Welkin was bumped off in 1952. And that big geezer with the broken nose – I don’t know who he was, but from the way he was dressed and his haircut, I reckon he came from the 1920s or thereabouts. There isn’t much chance that he’s still living and breathing.’

‘We have to kill them in 1941, so that they cannot protect Scratch,’ said Jamila. ‘Then we have to kill Scratch himself. If we do that, none of those villains will be able to move between parallel worlds again. So far as we know, at least.’

‘Oh, so we won’t be able to knock on Chance’s office door and say *ta-da!* and walk in with the Elephant Man’s uglier brother.’

‘Jerry – we are working on the assumption that Scratch is somehow able to manipulate time and space. There is only one way to stop him. Whichever one of his gang fired the shot that killed poor young Archie, Scratch is the one who is ultimately responsible. According to that note he is, anyway. And if we apply the law as it was in 1941, he deserves the death penalty.’

‘You do realise that if we go around offing people, and *we* get caught, we have no way of vanishing out of prison cells ourselves. And you’re right. The penalty for murder in 1941 was death. In fact, it wasn’t abolished until 1969. I’m not sure I fancy being hung.’

*

Two hours later, the Martian called Jamila again. He sounded confused.

‘We can’t get our heads round this. The bullet that killed Archie Cooper was fired from the same Colt .45 automatic as the bullet that killed Kenneth Treagus *and* the bullet that was accidentally discharged when those two offenders tried to abduct Jerry. There is absolutely no question about it.’

Jamila switched on her speaker phone, so that Jerry could hear the Martian too.

‘But you have that gun in your possession, at the lab,’ she said. ‘How could it have been used to kill Archie Cooper?’

‘Search me. But the lands and the grooves on all three bullets are almost identical, and they match the rifling inside the barrel of the automatic. We’ve fired five test rounds into our water recovery tank, and examined them under a comparison microscope, and all the striations are alike.’

‘You are one hundred per cent sure that Archie Cooper was shot by the same gun? And there is no way it could have been removed from Lambeth Road overnight and replaced afterwards?’

‘It was in the safe, and only two people have the combination to that safe, me and Melanie Tucker, and Melanie’s off on maternity leave. I can’t see her going to Wandsworth Common with a gun in one hand and a baby in the other. It’s enough of a mystery that the only fingerprints on it belong to a gangster who’s been dead since 1952.’

He paused, and then he said, ‘In the whole of my career I’ve never come across anything like this. It’s like one of those conjuring tricks – you know, when the magician puts a bottle of wine inside a paper bag and then crumples up the bag and there’s nothing in it.’

‘What we’d like to do is have a sniffer dog pick up the scent from the automatic’s grip,’ said Jamila. ‘You know Charlie Moss, don’t you? He’s the handler for a dog called Ghost. If it is okay with you, I intend to call him now and ask him to bring Ghost up to your lab. Either that, or you could take the gun down to the kennels.’

‘I’ll take it down there. I’ve been stuck in the lab all morning. I could do with some fresh air.’

Jamila switched off her phone and stared at Jerry as if she were expecting him to come up with some explanation for what the Martian had told them.

‘If it’s the same gun, then the odds are that it was fired by the same perp,’ said Jerry. ‘That geezer in the overcoat with the velvet collar who looks like a bookie. Roger Welkin. The Whelk. You remember what Mrs Treagus said about him? How he looked as if he didn’t have any feet? I bet he was partly in today and partly in 1941, and in 1941 he still had the gun, didn’t he?’

He sat back with his hands laced together behind his head. ‘You know something? I think I’m beginning to get the hang of this parallel world business. It’s not your time travel, is it? It’s not *time* that’s moving forward every time the clock ticks. It’s *us*. We’re leaving yesterday behind, but yesterday is still there, and the day before, and the day before that. I bet if I knew how to do it, I could go back to primary school and beat up that fat twat Wakefield for pinching all my conkers. And not all of me would have to go back. Just my fist.’

‘Let me call Charlie,’ said Jamila. ‘The sooner Ghost can pick up a scent from that gun, the better.’

26

By the time they arrived at the forensic laboratories on Lambeth Road, the Martian and Charlie were standing outside with Ghost, and Ghost had already sniffed the automatic for any trace of whoever might have handled it.

Ghost had that look of certainty in his eyes, and he was rhythmically wagging his tail, like a metronome.

‘So what’s the plan?’ asked Charlie. ‘Do you have any idea where our suspect might be hanging out?’

‘Since the only fingerprints on the gun belong to Roger Welkin – The Whelk – we should start by visiting Bolingbroke Grove, where he used to live.’

‘But Welkin’s house was bombed, wasn’t it?’ said the Martian. ‘It’s simply not there any more. And Welkin himself is long dead.’

‘It may give us some useful reference points to be starting off with,’ said Jamila. She was deliberately being vague. Even if she had tried to explain parallel worlds to the Martian, she doubted if he would understand what she was talking about, and even if he did, she doubted very much that he would believe her.

‘All I can say is, good luck,’ the Martian told her, shaking his head.

They drove to Bolingbroke Grove and parked outside the house that now belonged to Mrs Treagus. All the curtains were drawn and there was a For Sale sign outside.

Ghost jumped out of the back of the dog van and immediately trotted to the front gate, where he stood for a few moments, his head up and his tail down between his legs,

sniffing the air. Jamila and Jerry and Charlie all waited patiently for him to give them some indication that he could identify the same smell that he had picked up from the butt of the automatic.

‘He can definitely detect something,’ said Charlie. ‘Maybe he needs to get a bit closer.’

He opened the front gate and Ghost climbed halfway up the brick steps that led to the porch. Now he started to quiver, and let out soft growling noises from the back of his throat.

‘Your man’s here,’ said Charlie. ‘It might be impossible, but he’s here. There’s no two ways about it. What do you want to do?’

Jamila turned to Jerry. ‘Ghost has taken us to him. Outside, here we are in the present day. But *inside*—’

‘What? On the other side of that front door, you reckon it’s still 1941?’

‘Ghost certainly seems to believe that it is. I think we should ring the doorbell and find out.’ She took out her pistol and Jerry took out his too. ‘Charlie – it would be a good idea if you took Ghost out of the firing line.’

Charlie tugged a reluctant Ghost back out of the gate and led him fifty yards up the road. Jamila looked around to make sure there were no passers-by anywhere near, and then she nodded to Jerry to press the doorbell.

While they waited for an answer, they could faintly hear music coming from inside the house. Jerry listened for a few moments, holding up his hand, and then he said, ‘Vera Lynn, that sounds like. My gran was always playing old Vera Lynn records. There’ll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover. When they sound the last “all-clear”. All that wartime stuff. She said it reminded her of the days when her life was exciting.’

Jamila was about to answer him when the front door opened, and they found themselves face to face with Roger Welkin, in his shirtsleeves and red braces. The instant he saw who it was, and they were both pointing pistols at him, he tried

to swing the door shut again. Jerry was ready for that, and jumped forward to jam his foot behind the step.

Nobody spoke. Jamila and Jerry were not there to arrest him. Roger Welkin ran down the hallway into the kitchen and slammed the door behind him. Over the sound of Vera Lynn singing, Jamila and Jerry could hear the scraping noise of the kitchen table being dragged up against the door to act as a barrier.

Jerry took four or five quick steps and kicked the door as hard as he could, so that the frame splintered and the latch burst out of its strike plate. Then he rammed his shoulder against it and forced the table back, until there was enough of a gap for them to be able to enter the kitchen. While he was doing this, Jamila was keeping him covered with her pistol pointing into the ever widening space. Without either of them saying it, they both suspected that since the interior of this house was back in 1941, it was more than likely that Roger Welkin was still in possession of his .45 automatic.

As he pushed his way into the kitchen, Jerry ducked his head down below the table, in case Roger Welkin took a shot at him. But when he cautiously looked up, he could see that the French windows that faced out onto the back garden had been left wide open.

Dodging evasively from side to side, Jerry and Jamila made their way across the kitchen. It was definitely 1940s vintage, with an oak dresser and a deep ceramic sink with old-fashioned taps. It smelled as if somebody had recently been frying kippers.

They reached the French windows and peered out into the garden. It had a small rectangular lawn bordered on two sides with scruffy boxwood hedges, and at the far end of the lawn stood a greenhouse. Through the murky greenhouse windows they could just make out more overgrown plants, geraniums and ferns and salvia. The greenhouse door was slightly ajar, and Jerry was sure that he could see the ferns moving, as if somebody were trying to hide themselves among them. He pointed to the greenhouse and Jamila nodded. If Roger Welkin was hiding, it was doubtful that he had his gun with him.

Jerry felt his heart beating hard as he stepped out into the garden. It was a grey overcast afternoon but there was no wind and it was not particularly cold. When he looked to the north, he could see silvery barrage balloons floating over central London. Jamila saw them too, and gave him a look that was both meaningful and sad. They were both thinking about Archie, sitting in that swing, and who must have shot him.

They reached the greenhouse and Jerry eased open the door. The ferns swayed again, and he heard the sound of feet scrunching on the shingle that was spread over the floor. Both he and Jamila pointed their pistols at the ferns, but they gave Roger Welkin no warning. After all, Roger Welkin had probably given Archie no warning, but simply pointed his automatic and fired at his face.

Jamila fired first, and then Jerry. They each let off five deafening rounds, so that the ferns were torn into shreds and the greenhouse windows behind them were shattered. There was a five-second pause, and then Roger Welkin dropped face-first out of the shredded ferns, his shirt patterned with bloody red spots like blossoming poppies. One shot had hit him in the right eye so that it was nothing but an empty socket, but his left eye was staring down at the shingle with blank bewilderment.

‘So what do we do now?’ asked Jerry. ‘Do we leave him here?’ The gunfire had left him partially deaf so that his voice sounded as if he were speaking from inside the house.

‘Yes,’ said Jamila. ‘We have killed him in 1941 but he is still alive in every other year, right up to 1952, when he was finally shot. But at least we have given him the punishment he deserved for murdering Kenneth Treagus and young Archie, and at least he will not be able to protect his lord and master when we go for him.’

The smoke from their shooting was clearing now. Jerry looked down at Roger Welkin without any sense of pity or guilt. He felt nothing more than frustration that he had been able to kill him in only one of the parallel worlds in which he had lived, and not all of them.

‘Right,’ he said, as he closed the greenhouse door and started to walk back to the house. ‘Who’s next on the hit list?’

*

It took them less than five minutes to drive to the corner of Northcote Road and Salcott Road, where Charlie and Ghost were waiting for them outside the front gate. Ghost came scrabbling up to them, straining at his harness, as if he desperately wanted to know what had happened inside the house.

Jamila gently tugged at his ears and said, ‘You did us proud, boy. You are the most amazing dog I ever knew.’

Jerry gave Charlie a thumbs up. ‘Went like a dream, mate. In fact, it *felt* like a dream.’

‘I didn’t hear any shots. Did you manage to snuff him?’

‘You did not hear any shots because inside that house we were more than eighty years ago,’ said Jamila. ‘All thanks to this wonderful dog. His talent for passing into parallel worlds is more than equal to Scratch. He has been brought up to understand that time is not a barrier, and that is how he is able to open doors into yesterday and allow us to go through.’

‘He could make you a multi-millionaire,’ said Jerry. ‘Have you ever thought about that? You could go back and find out how all kinds of dodgy dealings were done, and then come back and blackmail the people who had done them. Politicians, businesspeople, sports stars.’

Charlie gave Ghost a Grub Club. ‘I don’t think he’d let me do that. He’s a very moral dog, most of the time. He even treats bitches with respect. If he was able to, I think he’d take every bitch out to dinner a few times before he gave them the old wahey.’

‘Blimey,’ said Jerry. ‘He’s even more respectful than me. But to answer your question – yes, Roger Welkin is a dead parrot, at least in 1941. He has ceased to be.’

‘Who are you going for now?’

‘Whoever killed Mary Jonas,’ said Jamila. ‘But I am afraid that there will be no other way for Ghost to trace her murderer than for him to pick up his scent from her remains. Her family are anxious to have her released for a funeral, but she is still in Greenwich mortuary, so I will be able to arrange it.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Charlie. ‘Ghost has a very strong stomach. If he can eat Grub Clubs, smelling a dead body will almost be a pleasure by comparison.’

*

They decided to leave their visit to the mortuary until the following morning, since it was growing late now and when they went to track down Mary Jonas’s killer they wanted his scent to be fresh in Ghost’s nostrils.

Jamila had to return to Redbridge too, to catch up with a case of racial violence in which she was involved. A grocery shop run by Shi’ites had been vandalised and its owner beaten up. Jerry drove back to Tooting and stopped at The Antelope pub for a cheeseburger and a pint of lager.

While he was sitting at his usual table in the corner, under the antelope horns, he saw a girl of about eleven years old making her way in his direction through the crowd of customers standing along the bar. She was very pale, this girl, with tangled blonde hair, and she was wearing a long woollen dress in a faded shade of turquoise. If he had been asked to describe her in one word, he would have said ‘orphan’.

She came right up to his table and stood in front of it, staring at him. He lowered his cheeseburger and said, ‘Yes, love? Did you want something?’

‘Are you DC Pardoe?’ she asked him, with a sibilant lisp.

‘What if I am?’

‘But *are* you?’

‘Yes, I am. Why do you want to know?’

‘Are you going home tonight?’

‘Well, I’m not staying here all night, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘That’s all I needed to know,’ said the girl. With that, she abruptly turned around and walked away.

‘Hey!’ Jerry called after her. He stood up so quickly that he knocked over his half-finished pint glass, but he managed to catch it before it all spilled over the table. ‘Hey! Wait!’

He went after the girl, pushing his way through the customers at the bar. They stared at him because the girl had already disappeared. He didn’t even see the door open to let her out onto the street.

‘Sorry,’ he said, returning to his table. ‘Sorry. You didn’t see a girl, did you? Blonde hair, about eleven or twelvish?’

‘No, mate,’ said one of the drinkers. His friends were looking at Jerry suspiciously, as if he were a paedophile, or drunk.

Jerry sat down again. He picked up his cheeseburger but he no longer had any appetite, so he wrapped it up in a paper napkin and pushed it into his pocket. Then he finished what was left of his lager and left.

For some reason, the girl’s appearance had really unsettled him. He was still feeling unreal after shooting Roger Welkin, and the questions that she had asked him and the way that she had vanished had made him feel even more like a character in *Alice in Wonderland*. As soon as he had sat down in the driving seat of his car and inserted the key in the ignition, he put down the window and lit a cigarette.

Are you going home tonight? Why had she asked him that?

He drove back to his flat and parked outside. As he climbed out of his car, he thought he saw a tall man dodging behind one of the plane trees on the opposite side of the road. He waited for a moment for the man to reappear on the other side of the tree, but there was no sign of him, as if he were hiding. What was strange was that the tree trunk was no more than nine or ten inches wide, and if the man were still standing behind it, Jerry would have been able to see his shoulders and his arms at least.

Jerry walked a short way along the pavement, so that he could see behind the tree from another angle, but there was still no man visible there. He wondered if he were being paranoid, and that the man lived in one of the houses opposite. Maybe he had simply gone in through his front gate and that was why he had seemed to disappear.

He debated with himself if he should cross the road and take a look behind the tree, but then he thought: what the hell for? There won't be anybody there and if there is he might have stopped to take a piss on his way home from the pub, and how embarrassing would that be? He hesitated for a few seconds longer but then he went back to his house and opened the front door. Before he went inside, though, he took one last look over his shoulder. There was no tall man in sight.

Rachel's television was turned up to maximum volume as usual, but he could hear that she was shouting to some friend of hers on the phone, so he didn't look in to check on her. He climbed upstairs, hung up his coat, and went to the fridge to take out a can of Tennent's. He felt like a shower, partly because he had been at work all day, and partly because he felt he needed absolution, to wash away his sins.

Shooting a child-murderer like Roger Welkin had been righteous, but he still wondered how executioners lived with themselves. Last year he had read the autobiography of the famous hangman Albert Pierrepoint, who in the course of his career had hanged nearly six hundred people, both men and women, but in the end had concluded that the death penalty was no deterrent at all. When he looped the rope around their neck, few of the people he hanged had seemed to care. In fact, some of them had even appeared to be happy, and relieved.

All Jerry knew was that they had to get rid of the criminals whom Scratch had recruited from times gone by. Otherwise, they would never be able to get rid of Scratch, and if they didn't get rid of Scratch, it was likely that more innocent victims like Kenneth Treagus and Mary Jonas and Sabina's mother and Archie Cooper would be horribly murdered.

He popped the top of his can of beer and went back into his living room, unbuttoning his shirt as he went. As he crossed

over to the window to draw the curtains, a man stepped out from behind them. Or half a man. Jerry could see only his left side, and that was not because he was partially hidden behind the curtain. He had a short haircut and he was wearing a beige cable-knit sweater, but he had no right side, as if he were standing behind a wall, or a shop window.

It was the eeriest thing Jerry had ever seen, and he was so shocked that he dropped his can of beer onto the carpet.

‘Who the hell are you? What the hell are you doing in my flat?’

The half-man approached him. From what Jerry could see of his expression, he was irritated, and impatient.

‘What am I doing in your flat?’ he retorted, in a throaty whisper. ‘You want to leave well enough alone, tosh, that’s what I’m doing in your flat. Come to teach you a lesson.’

Jerry could hardly hear him because of the muffled noise from Rachel’s television downstairs.

‘What are you talking about?’ he demanded, backing away towards the kitchen. ‘Why can I only see half of you?’

‘I’m all here, tosh, don’t you worry. You can see all you need to see. But what you want to do is keep your beezer out of business that don’t concern you – you and that Paki bird. Don’t you worry, she’s going to be next, after you.’

‘Are you the bloke that blinded that shopkeeper?’

‘Oh, you put two and two together! I should have guessed that you would, being a detective and all. Well, he deserved it, for being a prat. I blinded him, yes. But he was well lucky I didn’t do to him what I’m going to do to you. At least you won’t be needing a guide dog and a white stick.’

With that, he held out his left hand and a long screwdriver magically appeared in his palm, as if he had passed it over from his invisible right hand. He took two more steps towards Jerry, and held up the screwdriver, with half a smile on his lips.

Jerry backed into the kitchen. The half-man followed him, repeatedly making upward stabbing gestures with the screwdriver, as if he were getting ready to stick it into Jerry's stomach.

'You and that Paki bird, you came looking for Scratch, didn't you? You came to St Oswald's Place, didn't you? Well, that was where you made your fatal mistake. Nobody comes looking for Scratch. He's the kingpin, Scratch is. It's Scratch what makes the world go round. You don't come looking for Scratch or else Scratch will come looking for you.'

Jerry had almost reached the oven now. But next to the oven was the drawer in which he kept his cutlery. As the half-man took yet another step nearer, he reached out and pulled the drawer open. The half-man took what appeared to be a one-legged leap towards him, but Jerry scrabbled into the left-hand side of the drawer and snatched the handle of his carving knife.

As the half-man lifted his arm to stab him, Jerry kicked him hard in the crotch. Even though he appeared only to have one leg, Jerry could feel his testicles and his right thigh as he kicked him. The half-man let out a squeaky cry of '*Fuck!*' and bent double in agony.

Jerry grabbed the shaft of the screwdriver in his left hand and twisted it sideways, so that the inside of the half-man's wrist was exposed. Then with no hesitation, he sliced deeply right down to the bone. Blood spurted out of the half-man's severed veins and the screwdriver clattered onto the floor.

The half-man thrashed at Jerry with his invisible right arm. One blow caught Jerry on the side of the head and he staggered against the oven. But then he stabbed at the half-man's left side, cutting through his cable-knit sweater and piercing his ribcage. He stabbed him again and again, and the half-man tottered backwards. He was still flailing his arms, the visible left arm and the invisible right arm. Blood from his left arm was spraying all over the kitchen, and when his right arm managed to strike Jerry's shoulder, he felt as if he had been hit by a violent gust of wind.

Jerry stabbed him in the chest, twice, and this time the half-man spun around and fell heavily backwards, tipping over one of the kitchen chairs. He clung to the kitchen wall to keep himself upright, his left hand smearing blood down the pale yellow plaster. He was gasping, and a bubble of blood came out of the side of his mouth and popped.

‘You bastard,’ he whispered. ‘Scratch’ll get you for this. You fucking wait.’

With that, he pressed the left side of his head against the wall, and it was swallowed up. It actually disappeared, as if the wall were made of thick liquid, instead of solid. The rest of him followed, until he had vanished altogether, and all that was left was his bloody handprint and the fuzzy thistle-like bloodstains from his sweater.

Jerry stood in the kitchen, panting like Ghost, holding his carving knife and staring at the wall in disbelief. He could only guess that whoever this half-man was, he must have been sent by Scratch from some parallel world to this present-day world to kill him, but only his left side had come through. His right side had remained in the world where he had come from.

If it were not for the fact that he had come from a parallel world, Jerry would have been sure that the stab wounds he had given him would prove fatal. Maybe he would die in that world. But maybe that world was in the past, and in that world Jerry had not yet stabbed him.

He dropped the carving knife into the kitchen sink. He would leave it there for forensics to examine, and also leave the bloody handprint on the wall. It was remotely possible that the fingerprints and blood type and DNA would enable them to identify who this half-man had been. Since Scratch had recruited him for his army, it was highly likely that he had a criminal record.

Jerry took another can of Tennent’s out of the fridge and opened it. His hands were still trembling and he would have preferred a brandy. He felt as if he were still living in a bad dream and that he would not stop dreaming until Jamila and he

had finally cornered and eliminated Scratch. That was always supposing that Scratch failed to kill them both first.

Before he drew the curtains, he pulled them back and peered behind them, but he could see no apparent way that the half-man had entered from some other existence. He thought about the girl with the tangly blonde hair who had asked him in the pub if he was going home. She must have been one of Scratch's children, like one of Fagin's gang in *Oliver Twist*. There was no question now that Scratch could move people from one parallel world to another as easily as moving chess pieces from one square to another.

Jerry had to admit to himself that he was badly shaken. He had beaten that half-man, maybe even killed him, and forced him back to wherever he had come from. But Scratch had the allegiance of so many others, all vicious criminals, and supposing a different one appeared in the middle of the night, when he was asleep?

Supposing one of them appeared in Jamila's flat, and attacked her? The man they had identified as Roger Welkin had promised that they would go after her, when he had tried to abduct him from Lavender Hill, and so had the half-man this evening.

He rang Jamila. Her phone was busy at first, so he left a message for her to call him back. He wondered if he ought to call Audrey Morrison and tell her about his close encounter with the perpetrator who had blinded Yusuf Nadeem. It was her investigation, after all. He even found her number on his phone and was about to press it. But then he decided that it would only cause more complications than it was worth. It was highly unlikely that she would be able to grasp what he and Jamila were doing, or why. On top of that, there was a risk that she might tell DCI Chance they were planning to hunt down and summarily execute Scratch's gang of killers, rather than arresting them, and he might very well order them to stop.

Apart from that, Jerry couldn't really see what additional help she could offer them, even if she could grasp the concept of parallel worlds – and if she became involved then it was possible that Scratch's men might come after her too.

Jamila rang back. As simply as he could, Jerry told her about the girl at The Antelope, and how the half-man had appeared, and how he had stabbed him. He also told her that for the second time, *her* life had been threatened too.

‘There is only one answer,’ said Jamila. ‘Either I will have to come to you tonight, or you will have to come to me. One of us will then have to stay awake while the other sleeps.’

‘I’m not sure I could sleep after what’s happened.’

‘Very well. Come to my place. Have you eaten? I have some leftover rajma chawal if you’re hungry.’

‘I’ve just killed two men in one day, Sarge. At least, I think I have. The last thing I feel like is curry.’

On his way to Jamila's flat, Jerry stopped off at Lavender Hill to pick up his SIG Sauer pistol. Even though Roger Welkin's automatic was now in the forensic laboratory at Lambeth Road, and they had shot Roger Welkin, there was no way of knowing if any other member of Scratch's gang might be armed. Even if none of them had guns, Jerry had no desire to stab anyone, ever again.

Jamila rented a ground-floor apartment in a 1950s house in Longwood Gardens, in Redbridge. The front garden had been paved over, like every other house in the road, so Jerry was able to park his car right in front of her living-room window. She parted her curtains when she heard him slamming his car door, and gave him a wave.

Inside, her flat was warm and smelled of curry and incense and a strong floral perfume. Above the fireplace she had hung a picture of some Hindu goddess, a beautiful smiling woman with ten arms, riding on a lion. In each of her hands she was holding something different, including a sword and a lotus flower and a club and a conch shell.

The mantelpiece was also crowded with framed photographs of Jamila's family, and postcards of Pakistan.

'You look stressed,' said Jamila. She was wearing a red-and-yellow patterned sari, and her feet were bare, with silver rings on two of her toes. 'Sit down and relax. Would you like some tea, or some coffee?'

'Actually, I stopped off at Oddbins on the way here and bought myself a half-bottle of Johnnie Walker, if that's not against your religion.'

‘I am a believer, Jerry, but I am not a religious zealot. That picture on the wall is the Goddess Durga, and for me she symbolises the power of women against evil.’

‘I wouldn’t challenge her to an arm-wrestle, let’s put it that way.’

‘She was created by Brahma and Vishnu and Shiva to hunt down and kill the deceitful demon Mahishasura, a shapeshifter who was half-buffalo and half-man.’

‘Don’t talk to me about people who are half one thing and half another. In the case of the geezer who attacked me this evening, he was half-man and half-nothing. I could *feel* his invisible half, though, when I kicked him in the goolies. No doubt about that.’

Jamila looked serious. ‘I am wondering if there is a scientific connection between the legend of Mahishasura and the criminals in Scratch’s gang. I certainly believe that they have something in common with jinns. Partly in one world and partly in another.’

‘I only wish they’d go back to wherever they came from and leave us alone.’

‘This half-man – do you think you killed him?’

‘I couldn’t honestly tell you. He was bleeding like a pig but he was still alive when he disappeared right through my kitchen wall. And of course I haven’t a clue where he went. Perhaps he went back in time, or sideways into some parallel world. Or he could have simply gone back out into the street, because I think I might have seen him out there when I came home.’

‘Here, give me your bottle of whisky and I will pour you a drink. Would you like ice, or water?’

‘A couple of lumps of ice, thanks. No water. You know what W. C. Fields said about water.’

Jerry took off his holster, laid his pistol on the side table, and sat down. Jamila went through to her kitchen and came back with a large glass of whisky with ice cubes tinkling in it, as well as a plate of kachori, deep-fried pastry snacks.

‘The worst aspect of this whole business is that we cannot explain Scratch or the concept of parallel worlds to the very officers we have been brought in to assist,’ said Jamila. ‘It feels almost like betrayal. Yet I know that they would not believe us. Or even if they did believe us, they would have no idea how to put an end to Scratch and his gang.’

‘I don’t think *we* would have known either, would we, if it hadn’t been for Ghost? And it’s nothing short of a blessing that Charlie understands what Ghost can do. When this is all over, I’m going to make sure that both Charlie and Ghost get one of those Thin Blue Paw medals for outstanding service. And I’ll buy Ghost a year’s supply of those bug biscuits he likes so much.’

Jamila was biting into a kachori and she couldn’t help spitting out crumbs. ‘You should not have mentioned those just at this moment. I was interested in them and so I googled them to see what was in them. Black soldier-fly larvae. They are supposed to be so much healthier to eat than meat.’

‘Sorry. I think I’ll stick with Burger King.’

‘Tomorrow, we will have to take Ghost to Greenwich to find out if he can pick up a scent from Mary Jonas’s remains. If he can, then I think we should take him to Brookwood School, to the spot on the sports field where she was found, and see where he goes from there.’

Jerry sipped his whisky and gave an exaggerated shudder. ‘I have such a bad feeling about this one. There was no theft involved in Mary Jonas’s murder. No sexual interference. It reminds me of a case I was given only the second month after I started at Tooting. It was a total nutter who worked for a tree-trimming company. He killed women just because it gave him a buzz. Didn’t rape them or nothing like that. But he got them drunk and then undressed them and fed them feet-first into his wood chipper. Alive. The bloody thing made so much noise that nobody heard them screaming.’

A clock on the mantelpiece chimed eleven. Jamila said, ‘I am very tired so I will try to get some sleep now. Give me until four in the morning, say, and then wake me up and you

can sleep. Help yourself to anything you want. There are plenty more snacks in the kitchen.'

She stood up and laid her hand on Jerry's shoulder. 'I feel that you and I are alone with this investigation, Jerry. Well – apart from Charlie and Ghost. I have to say that I admire your willingness to believe things that most people would find unbelievable. Not only that, I trust you and I value your support.'

Jerry was almost tempted to tell her that part of the reason he was so supportive was that he found her so attractive. Apart from her looks, he loved her placid, spiritual nature, which always calmed him down, and the measured way in which she spoke, even when he knew she was irritated or angry. But he nodded in appreciation, and raised his glass, and all he said was, 'Cheers, Sarge. Sleep tight. Don't let the bugs bite. I'll give you a bell at four.'

*

Jamila went through to her bedroom and after only a few minutes she switched off her light. Jerry topped up his glass of whisky and then sat down to read the sports pages in *The Sun*. His team, Millwall, had lost three games in succession, and if Jerry had been in charge, he would have sacked their manager by now.

Halfway through reading, he put down his paper and lifted his right hand, staring at it as if it belonged to someone else. He found it impossible to forget the feeling of stabbing that half-man, and the audible crunch of his knife as it had penetrated his cable-knit sweater and then his ribcage. Neither could he forget the way in which the half-man had been swallowed up by his kitchen wall and disappeared, leaving nothing but bloodstains. He understood that human beings are nothing more than highly charged collections of atoms, so presumably it was possible for one collection of atoms to pass through another collection of atoms, like sand passing through a sieve, but he also knew that if *he* tried to push himself through his kitchen wall, head-first, he would probably end up concussed and flat on his back on the floor.

Shortly after midnight, he stood up and went over to Jamila's bedroom door. He opened it quietly and peered inside. He could hear her breathing and since she had left the blinds raised, there was just enough light coming in from the back garden for him to be able to see her lying on her back. Her lips were slightly parted and her hands were spread wide like the Goddess Durga, but with eight fewer arms.

He closed the door and went back to switch on the television, with the volume turned right down so that it wouldn't disturb her. He was beginning to feel seriously exhausted himself, and he needed something to keep him awake, even if it was only a Sky documentary about the assassination of Kim Jong-Un's half-brother.

Another hour went by. Jerry thought about pouring himself a third and final Scotch, but then decided against it. He was finding it difficult enough to stay awake as it was, and the last thing he wanted after only three or four hours' sleep was a hangover. Tomorrow, when they went hunting with Ghost for the man who had murdered Mary Jonas, his mind needed to be as clear as glass.

He flicked through the television channels to see if he could find something lighter to watch than a Korean killing. He had just found an episode of *Girls* when he heard a shrill scream from Jamila's bedroom.

'Jerry!' she cried out. '*Jerry!*'

He flung aside the remote and reached over for his pistol, tugging it out of its holster. Then he vaulted over the back of the sofa and burst into Jamila's bedroom. She was kneeling up on her bed, clutching her duvet, and when he came in she pointed to the window. The glass was sparkling with raindrops, although he hadn't heard it start to rain outside. Behind the raindrops he could see three figures standing, all of them dressed in black, with dead white faces.

One of the three was wearing dark glasses with circular lenses. The other two were glaring into Jamila's bedroom with unblinking intensity, as if they believed they could melt the window with their eyes.

‘Jesus,’ said Jerry. ‘Scratch’s men, I’ll bet you anything.’

The man with the dark glasses beat at the window with his fist and shouted something, although Jerry couldn’t make out what it was. He beat at the window a second time, and shouted again, and this time Jerry thought he heard the word ‘*Open!*’

Jerry went up to the window and shouted back, ‘Get the hell out of there! Fuck off!’

One of the other men lifted up a claw hammer and waved it slowly from side to side, as if to tell Jerry that if he refused to open the window, he would break it open.

Jerry had never seen faces so devoid of any expression. They could have been wearing white masks, or Pierrot clown make-up. Despite his anger, he felt a shiver of dread all the way down his spine.

The man in the dark glasses shouted again. Jerry raised his pistol and pointed it at him, but almost at once the man with the hammer swung his arm back and smashed the glass. A large triangular piece fell at Jerry’s feet, and he was showered by smaller fragments, like an ice storm.

The man took a step forward, over the sill, so Jerry squeezed the trigger and fired at him. Usually, he would have let off a warning shot first, but these were Scratch’s men and he and Jamila intended to hunt them down and execute them anyway. The man dropped his hammer and took three staggering steps backwards.

Now Jerry aimed at the man in the dark glasses. He fired again and he must have hit him in the bicep, because the sleeve of his black coat flew up as if Jerry had startled a blackbird that had been perched on his shoulder. He heard the man swear and saw him clutch at his sleeve.

He fired a third time. He was deaf by now. The man with the dark glasses seized one arm of the man who had been wielding the hammer, while the third man took hold of his other arm. They supported him between them as they all turned around and started to limp off like a three-legged race into the darkness.

Jerry stepped out through the broken window, ready to shoot all three of them in the back. But behind him, Jamila called out, 'Let them go, Jerry! Let them go! We don't even know who they are!'

'If we don't whack them now, Sarge, we'll only have to whack them later!' Jerry called back.

The three men were halfway down the garden now, and had almost reached a stone birdbath with a circular paved area around it. Jerry aimed his pistol with both hands, but as he did so the men all began to sink. Right in front of his eyes, they started to disappear into the paving stones. Within a matter of seconds they were swallowed up to their waists, and then their chests, and then Jerry could see nothing but their heads. He was tempted to shoot at them before they disappeared altogether, but he wasn't sure that he could hit their heads at this distance. Apart from that, the lights had been switched on in the bedroom above Jamila's, and in the bedroom windows of the houses on either side, and he didn't want to attract any more attention than he needed to. All that shouting and breaking glass and pistol shots must surely have led the tenants upstairs or the next-door neighbours to call the police.

The three heads sank down to their scalps, until they were no more than three black wigs lying on the paving stones, and then they too were gone. Jerry walked up to the birdbath and stamped on the ground, but it was rock hard, and impenetrable.

He returned to the house and stepped back into Jamila's bedroom.

'Completely gone,' he told her. 'Sunk under the ground. Just like that jinn your granny saw.'

'Did you recognise any of them?'

He shook his head. 'No, I didn't. But I'd bloody well know them again.'

'I think they must have come from the late 1940s or early 1950s,' said Jamila. 'During the war, this area was an RAF airfield, and after the war it was all dug up for gravel pits. Some of the gravel pits were filled with water to make the

lakes at Fairlop Park, but others were just filled in and houses built on them. I am guessing that those men climbed out of one of those 1950s gravel pits, and that is where they returned to.'

'I don't think there's any question that Scratch sent them. You and me will have to keep our eyes in the back of our bonces until we can get rid of Scratch once and for all.'

There was an urgent ringing at the front doorbell, followed by knocking, and they could see blue lights flashing in the street outside.

'What are we going to tell them?' asked Jerry.

'Attempted robbery,' said Jamila. 'I happen to know that the man next door deals in antique coins. Maybe they were trying to burgle him but they made a mistake and picked the wrong house.'

The doorbell rang again, and the knocking was repeated.

'Blimey, Sarge,' said Jerry. 'For a vegan, you don't half come out with some top-rate porky pies.'

They had to wait in the viewing room for more than twenty minutes before the remains of Mary Jonas were at last wheeled in. It was chilly in there, with no windows, and only a reproduction of Constable's *Hay Wain* on the wall. Jerry wondered if a painting of a farm cart crossing a stream had been put up to represent passing from one world into the next.

The gingery-haired morgue attendant folded back the sheet that was covering Mary Jonas's body with the utmost care, but when he had removed it he gave it a sharp snap and Jerry was surprised that he didn't say *Ta-dah!*

After her forensic autopsy she had been lying here in a refrigerated cabinet, and so the wreckage of her body had not yet begun to decompose. However, she had been so badly burned and crushed that it had been impossible to put her back together so her husband and her relatives could view her.

'Bloody hell,' said Charlie. 'We haven't seen many as bad as this, have we, boy?'

The morgue attendant pressed a button to lower the mattress platform so that Ghost would be able to sniff at the body more easily. He approached it slowly, with his tail wagging *adagissimo*.

Jamila and Jerry and Charlie watched in silence as Ghost circled around the trolley, breathing in the smell of Mary Jonas's broken and partially incinerated remains. They had to hope that at some point, her killer had lifted her up with his bare hands and left some trace of himself on her, no matter how insignificant.

When he had reached the end of the trolley, where Mary Jonas's charred skull was lying, Ghost stopped inhaling and looked up at Charlie. He gave a strange burring sound in the back of his throat and his ears flattened.

'He can *sense* her,' said Charlie.

'What?' said Jerry.

'He can sense her spirit. She hasn't left her brain yet, and so he can sense her.'

'What does that mean?' asked Jamila. 'Does it mean that she has not yet been able to find any peace?'

'Well, she hasn't gone to heaven yet, if that's what you're talking about.'

'I wonder why. And I wonder what can release her.'

'What is this?' said Jerry. 'A sniffer-dog session or a séance?'

'Jerry, cock – you've already seen what Ghost can do. And since he's been working with you two ghostbusters, he's been doing stuff that even *I* never knew he could do, and I'm like his dad. Like that Billingsgate business. I still find it hard to believe that actually happened.'

Ghost was watching Charlie talking to Jerry, as if he could understand what he was saying. Then he continued sniffing down the opposite side of Mary Jonas's remains.

'He's not found owt yet,' said Charlie. 'I think this might turn out to be a waste of time.'

It was then, though, that Ghost stopped by Mary Jonas's right hip, which had not been charred like her chest and the left side of her stomach. He inhaled deeply, and hesitated, and then inhaled again. Then he backed away from the trolley and let out a thin, quavering whine, as if to say, *I've found him – I've found the man you're trying to trace.*

He came around the trolley and stared up at Charlie with that look of utter certainty, and now his tail was wagging *allegro*.

‘I think he’s got it,’ said Jerry. ‘By George, he’s got it.’

‘Right,’ said Jamila. ‘Let us take him to Brookwood School. The sooner the better. Any man who can do this to an innocent woman deserves to be punished for it, no matter where or when he comes from.’

*

Sheila Daventry, the head teacher, accompanied them onto the playing field. The spot where Mary Jonas had been found was still cordoned off and covered by a blue forensic tent.

‘Do you really think that you’ll be able to find who killed her?’ asked Sheila Daventry. ‘It all seems impossibly weird. And frightening too. Several children are still off school because they were so traumatised by seeing those legs on the ceiling.’

‘We believe that we know now why they saw those legs,’ Jamila told her. ‘It is only a question now of tracing who they belonged to, and believe me this dog is our very best chance of doing that.’

Sheila Daventry stood waiting by the flap in the tent until Charlie and Ghost reappeared.

‘Did you have any luck?’ she asked Charlie.

Charlie pointed across the playing field towards the school gates. ‘Oh, yes. Take a look at the way he’s straining on the lead. He’s picked up the scent and he’s desperate to be hauling off in that direction.’

‘Well done, Ghost,’ said Jamila. ‘Charlie – Jerry and I will go back to our apartments and wait for you to call us.’

‘Gotcha,’ said Charlie. He already knew that until this investigation was resolved, both Jamila and Jerry would be staying in rented apartments on Lavender Gardens. They had not attempted to explain parallel worlds to DCI Chance, but they had told him that some of their suspect’s gang members had discovered where they lived, and had tried to attack them, in the same way that Jerry had been attacked at the station. For the time being, they needed somewhere safe and anonymous to stay.

Herbert Chance had agreed that they could rent accommodation close by. 'But do you have any idea yet of your suspect's true identity?'

'We are working on it,' Jamila had told him. 'We believe we are very close.'

In the same way Jerry had decided not to brief him about The Fishmonger, she had thought it wiser not to tell Herbert Chance that their most likely suspect could be the malevolent twin of Joseph Merrick, and that he was hiding in a cellar in 1941, during the Blitz. He would think she had gone mad.

'Well, the sooner you can come up with a result, the better,' Herbert Chance had replied. 'I've even got the Commissioner breathing down my neck now.'

Charlie and Ghost walked off across the school playing fields, while Jamila and Jerry said goodbye to Sheila Daventry and then followed them. Another officer was waiting in a dog van that was parked outside the school gates. When Ghost started to follow the scent along the road, with Charlie in tow, this officer would creep along behind them, ready to pick them up when they reached the end of the trail.

Jamila said, 'Be very careful, Charlie. If you manage to track our suspect down, make sure that he does not realise you have located him until we arrive. I have already seen how eager Ghost can be when he has found the man he is after.'

'Too right,' said Jerry. 'If he was able to, I reckon Ghost would cuff them himself.'

Ghost was scratching at the pavement, impatient to get going, and so Charlie gave Jamila and Jerry a salute and went off. He was heading south-east, in the direction of Clapham Junction. The dog van driver started up his engine and set off after him, with his hazard lights flashing.

Jamila and Jerry drove back to Lavender Gardens, a long straight street of red-brick Victorian mansions. Both of their apartments were on the first floor, with a living room and a bedroom and a small kitchen. They went into Jamila's living room and she switched on her laptop so they could catch up

with the latest progress their colleagues had been making. It turned out that they had made almost none. They had found no CCTV recordings that showed suspects entering or leaving any of the crime scenes. They had found no fingerprint or DNA matches. Apart from the witnesses they had interviewed already, they had found nobody who had given them new leads that they could follow up. The only significant clues they had were that Kenneth Treagus and Archie Cooper had been shot with the same pistol, and that the man who had sliced Kathleen Hartley and the man who had butchered and burned Mary Jonas both smoked the same outdated brand of cigarettes.

‘I know that we are taking the law into our own hands by executing these men,’ said Jamila. ‘But I cannot see any other way of bringing them to justice. Conventional detective work is not going to be able to do it.’

‘Let’s keep our fingers crossed that Ghost can sniff out whoever it was who topped Mary Jonas.’

Jamila’s phone rang. She picked it up and said, ‘Charlie?’

‘No, ma’am. It’s Derek Grant, from forensics. I wanted to tell you we’ve completed tests on that hammer that was dropped outside your flat last night.’

‘Oh, really? Did you find anything interesting?’

‘I would say so. It has fingerprints on it that match the fingerprints of a wanted drug dealer from Brighton. His name’s Michael Slack. He served three years of a five-year sentence in Lewes Prison for running a county lines gang and he was only released on licence three months ago.’

‘Do you know how old he is?’ asked Jamila.

‘Hang on... yes, here it is. He’s twenty-eight. He’s currently wanted for starting up a new county lines operation in Hastings.’

‘Do you have a mug shot you can send me?’

‘By all means. Although I must say I’ve seen dinner plates more interesting than him.’

‘I am sure that Jerry will know if it is the right man.’

‘Oh – and could you tell Jerry that we’ve taken samples of the bloodstains from his kitchen wall, but so far we haven’t been able to make a match. All we know is that the perp is type A positive and that he has diabetes.’

Jamila hung up and started to explain to Jerry what the Martian had been telling her. A few seconds later, Michael Slack’s white, expressionless face popped up on the screen of her laptop.

‘You know what this means, don’t you?’ said Jerry. ‘It means that Scratch is not only recruiting your criminals from times gone by, but your present-day criminals too. That means we might have to knock off suspects who are living as well as ones who are already brown bread. And that could be bloody risky, to say the least. We could get done for first-degree murder.’

‘It may not be such a risk as you suppose,’ Jamila replied, still staring at the mug shot of Michael Slack. ‘If Scratch has taken them into his army, then he must have taken them back to 1941. And if we execute them in 1941, then nobody will ever know where they have gone, and what happened to them. It will not mean that they have not been born and lived their lives up until today. It will mean only that they have disappeared and will never reappear.’

‘This is doing my head in,’ said Jerry. ‘What you’re saying is, if we execute this Michael Slack in 1941, he’ll be dead before he’s born. But even though he’s dead, that won’t stop him from being born.’

‘Yes. At least, that is the way I understand quantum theory. He will be like Schrödinger’s cat, both alive and dead at the same time. What Scratch is doing is not magic, Jerry, and it is not supernatural. It is science. This laptop could not work without the same science.’

‘If you ask me, that’s what explains my football team. Both dead and alive at the same time.’

Jamila’s phone rang again. This time it was Charlie.

‘I’m pretty sure we’ve found him, ma’am. And you’ll never guess where. It only took us twenty minutes to get here, but now we’re keeping our distance, like you said, in case the perp catches sight of us, and puts two and two together.’

‘So where are you?’

‘Salcott Road, number 79, where Ghost took us before, when we were tracking those two kids.’

‘Seventy-nine Salcott Road? But there is no house there.’

‘Maybe not. But Ghost seems to be sure that he’s located him. I haven’t let him get near yet but he’s shaking like a jelly.’

‘Very well, Charlie. We will be with you as quick as we can.’

At the mention of Salcott Road, Jerry had already buckled on his holster and now he was reaching for his coat. He passed Jamila her coat and gave her a meaningful look.

‘Dead and alive at the same time, Sarge.’

*

It took them less than five minutes to drive to the corner of Northcote Road and Salcott Road, where Charlie and Ghost were waiting for them in the dog van, along with its driver, a relentlessly cheerful black officer who Jerry had worked with before.

Ghost was pacing restlessly up and down in the back of the van, and repeatedly whining and whuffling in frustration. When Charlie opened the doors, he sprang out as if he had been shot from a catapult, and started to dance on the pavement, around and around, waiting for Charlie to snap his lead onto his harness and set off up Salcott Road.

‘God knows what we’re going to find,’ said Charlie. ‘Maybe nothing, like we did the last time.’

‘Last time the children had already been and gone, remember,’ said Jamila. ‘But from the way Ghost is behaving now, I think our suspect could actually still be there.’

‘In a house that doesn’t exist any more?’

‘But that is the whole point. It is what some physicists call a “multiverse”. You could say that Old Billingsgate doesn’t exist any more, or that the inside of Roger Welkin’s house doesn’t exist any more. But they still do, in their parallel worlds, and that is why Ghost was able to take us there.’

Ghost was pulling so hard on his harness now that Charlie started to jog, and Jamila and Jerry had to start jogging too, to keep up with them. Jerry was soon panting as loudly as Ghost, and his chest felt tight, and not for the first time he promised himself that he would give up smoking cigarettes.

As they jogged, he noticed that the clouds began to roll past faster, so that the sunlight started to flicker. One second the sun was shining and the next second it vanished, only to reappear the second after that. He noticed too that the trees that lined the road began rapidly to shrink, and shed their leaves, and some of them vanished into the ground altogether.

By now, Jamila was at least half a dozen paces ahead of him, and he was too breathless to shout out to her. Yet he was sure that she too must be able to see the sun flashing in the sky like an Aldis lamp sending warning messages in Morse.

And when it came into sight, he was sure that she could also see 79 Salcott Road, where a semi-detached house now stood, instead of the patio that they had seen in the present day. It was one of the shabbiest houses in the street. Behind an overgrown laurel hedge, a dented dustbin was surrounded by weeds. The paint around the window frames was peeling and the drainpipes were rusty.

All its windows were covered with brown sticky tape in X patterns, but when Jerry looked around the street he could see that the windows of every other house were taped in the same way. He could also see that there were only two cars parked within sight – one of them a black vintage Wolseley and the other a blue Standard Ten, which he guessed must have dated from the mid-1930s. Two men in cloth caps rode past them on bicycles.

Ghost pulled Charlie into the porch and right up to the front door. Then he stood upright on his hind legs, his claws scraping at the paintwork, as if he were trying to see into the house through the semicircular stained-glass window. His hair was bristling, and he was shivering even more violently than he had when he tracked down Jasper Starke at Billingsgate.

Jamila took her pistol out of its holster, although she kept it concealed in her coat pocket. She nodded to Jerry to do the same, and then she reached across and pressed the doorbell. They could hear it ringing in the hallway, and voices, and Charlie dragged Ghost away from the porch and back as far as the rotten front gate.

They heard footsteps, and then the front door was opened just wide enough for an elderly woman to peer out at them. They could see that the chain was still fastened.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded, making no attempt to hide her hostility. ‘I’m not buying anything today, thank you.’

‘We are not selling anything, madam,’ said Jamila. ‘We are police officers and we are looking for anybody you might have inside the house with you.’

‘You don’t *look* like police officers. And if I happen to have anybody in the house with me, I can’t see that it’s any business of yours.’

‘Are you Mrs Chibnall, by any chance?’ asked Jerry.

‘That’s no business of yours either.’

‘Edith?’ a man called out. ‘Who’s that at the door, Edith?’

‘I don’t know, Ronnie. They say they’re coppers but they look more like they’re trying to sell Bibles.’

‘Tell them to bog off.’

‘*Charlie!*’ shouted Jamila. And then, to Jerry, ‘*Go-go-go!*’

Jerry took a quick step forward and kicked the front door as hard as he could. The chain burst apart and the elderly woman toppled over onto her back, her legs in the air, so that one slipper went flying and Jerry could see her knee-length bloomers.

‘Get out!’ she screamed at him, but he stepped over her, with his pistol raised, and dodged in through the living-room door. It was cluttered with worn-out furniture, and it smelled of lavender and cigarettes and cats, but there was nobody in there.

Ghost came scrambling into the hallway, rucking up the doormat, and headed for the kitchen. Charlie had let him off the lead, and he went through the kitchen door like a rocket, knocking over two stools.

The back door slammed. Ghost barked, and barked again, and scabbled furiously at the door panels. Jerry was about to follow him into the kitchen, but as he passed the small hallway window, he heard clattering footsteps, and through the grimy net curtain he glimpsed a man running along the alley at the side of the house.

Jamila was helping Mrs Chibnall up from the floor, and Charlie was still standing by the front door.

‘He’s getting away!’ Jerry shouted, and pointed frantically towards the street.

Charlie stuck two fingers into his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. Immediately, Ghost came barrelling back out of the kitchen. Jerry had already reached the front gate, and had wrenched it open again, but Ghost almost knocked him over.

Jerry saw the man running down the street in the direction of Northcote Road, and Ghost went pelting after him. After less than a hundred yards he caught up with him, and jumped up onto his back. The man staggered, and went down onto his knees, but then he twisted around and punched Ghost hard on the side of his head. Ghost must have been stunned for a few seconds, because the man heaved himself back up onto his feet, grabbed both of Ghost’s front legs, and swung him around in the air like a dark brown sack. When he let go, Ghost was flung over the fence of the nearest front garden and hit his spine on a concrete birdbath. He let out a pitiful howl of pain.

‘Stop!’ yelled Jerry. ‘Armed police!’

The man looked back at him, and it was then that Jerry recognised him as the man with the broken nose who had tried to abduct him at Lavender Hill station, and who had threatened them at St Oswald's Place. He had intended to fire only a warning shot if the man tried to keep running away, but now he knew for certain that this was one of Scratch's gang, and that this was the man who had murdered Mary Jonas.

He also knew that Ghost had taken them through to 1941, and that if he shot him now, he would be killing him more than eighty years ago. As if to confirm what year they were in, he heard air-raid sirens suddenly start up from the direction of central London. Moaning Minnie, they used to be called, and their endless wailing gave him a chilly, prickling sensation.

He stopped, took aim, and fired at the man three times. The man had nearly reached Northcote Road now, but Jerry must have hit him with at least one bullet, because he stumbled and staggered. He kept running, though, with an exaggerated Long John Silver limp, and Jerry fired again, although this time he could not be sure that he had hit him.

Jamila and Charlie caught up with Jerry. Charlie unlatched the gate of the garden into which the man had thrown Ghost, and Ghost could not have been too badly hurt, because as soon as the gate was open he went hurtling down the road as if he were thirsting for revenge.

'You have wounded him at least,' said Jamila, as they carried on running. She didn't have to say that they needed to finish him off. They had seen what he had done to Mary Jonas, and that was more than enough to warrant his execution.

The sirens moaned on and on, one moan rising above the other, as if they were competing with each other to sound the most miserable. The man reached Northcote Road and hobbled across the pavement. He hesitated to let a van go past, and looked back over his shoulder. Jerry could see that there was blood on his chin, so a bullet might have pierced one of his lungs.

'Stop!' Jamila called out to him. 'Police! Stop where you are!'

The man ignored her, and hopped awkwardly into the road and started to cross it. As he did so, though, they heard a bell clanging. A tram was approaching from the south, at full speed. The man gave two long hops, trying to get over the tramlines before Ghost could catch up with him again, but he caught his foot on the nearest rail and fell face down onto the track, with his arms spread wide, as if he were praying.

Jerry heard the tram's brakes screeching, but it was too late. Its front wheels ran over the man's neck, beheading him, and over his hips, crushing his pelvis. His abdomen exploded, so that his intestines came wriggling out on either side of his backbone like a nest of slippery red snakes. Both his legs kicked up backwards, as if he were enjoying the feeling of being run over, but then they flopped down again.

The tram came to a grinding halt. Ghost started to cross the road, but Charlie whistled him back. They all stayed where they were on the corner of Salcott Road, watching as the female driver climbed down from the tram, and her passengers and passers-by gathered in a silent, shocked circle around the man's remains. One passenger went to the phone box on the corner of Wakehurst Road to call for an ambulance.

'I think we have done what we came to do,' said Jamila. 'What can we do now, to get back?'

'Let's hope that Ghost can do that for us,' said Charlie.

Ghost was sitting on the pavement staring at the man's legs, protruding from under the tram. Charlie said, 'Well done, boy. You've got him. Good work. We can go now.'

He gave Ghost a Grub Club and snapped on his lead. Then they all started to walk back up Salcott Road. As they walked, the clouds began to hurry back in the opposite direction, and the sun started to flicker on and off, as it had before. The trees started to grow higher and higher, and scattered leaves sprang up from the pavement with a soft rustling sound to reattach themselves to their branches.

They reached number 79, and now there was no house there, only the neatly trimmed hedge with the patio behind it. None of the surrounding houses had tape Xs stuck to their

windows, and cars were parked along the whole length of the road, on both sides, and all of them were modern.

Jamila looked up at Jerry. 'Did we dream that?'

'Even if we did, he got what was coming to him. Ronnie, that's what that Mrs Chibnall called him. Hopefully there'll be some accident records so that we can ID him. I know a lot of Londoners got killed during the war, but I don't suppose too many of them got squished by trams.'

'Let us suppose that it was not a dream,' said Jamila. All the same, she sounded shaken. 'Now we have to decide who is next on our hit list.'

They found out at last who ‘Ronnie’ was – not from any wartime records from the London Ambulance Service or the Greenwich morgue, but from a book entitled *Railway & Tramway Accidents* by G. W. Moffat, a member of Her Majesty’s Railway Inspectorate, which had been set up in 1840 to investigate fatalities caused by trains and trams.

This book had been published in 1949, after a train was derailed at Lewisham, with eleven passengers being killed. But it also included a chapter on people who had died in the previous ten years under the wheels of Britain’s trams. Some of their deaths had been accidental, while others had been suicides. At least seven, though, had been murders, with victims being concussed or drugged or rendered helpless with alcohol.

The chief suspect in five of these murders was a violent criminal called Ronald Tuggey, who had raped or sexually assaulted women and then laid them unconscious or semi-conscious in front of trams or trains. He had been known by the nickname of ‘Railway Ronnie’.

Tuggey had been caught trespassing on the tracks at Clapham Junction in the winter of 1947, carrying a half-naked girl over his shoulder. He had been charged with murder and attempted murder, but after his arrest he had escaped from Wandsworth police station and was never seen or heard of again.

Jerry scrolled through all the mug shots he could find from Wandsworth in 1947, and eventually he found ‘Railway Ronnie’, unshaven, glaring at the camera as if he could happily throw the police photographer under a train or a tram.

There was no question that it was the same man with the broken nose who he had shot, and who had been crushed beneath the wheels of that tram in Northcote Road. Just as Jamila had explained it, he had been dead and alive at the same time.

Now Jamila suggested that they go after Terence Wakefield, their prime suspect in the brutal murder of Sabina's mother, Lilian.

'But he's disabled, isn't he? He can't give us too much trouble when we go looking for Scratch.'

'You underestimate disabled people, Jerry. He may have been in a wheelchair, but he still managed to dismember Mrs Ferris. And we have no idea what year he was in when he killed her. Maybe he was *not* disabled. It is possible that Scratch brought him through from an earlier time. The Terence Wakefield who existed before he was wounded at Dunkirk still exists, and judging from his criminal record, he is perfectly capable of defending Scratch.'

'So where can Ghost pick up his scent?'

'In the kitchen where Mrs Ferris was murdered, I imagine. And this time we should not have so far to go to find him. Before it was bombed, his block of flats used to stand in the same place as the Ferris house.'

'I'm not too sure how I feel about shooting a fellow in a wheelchair.'

'You saw what he did to Mrs Ferris, Jerry. I do not think that he deserves much in the way of mercy.'

'Right-o, then,' said Jerry grimly. 'Are you going to call Charlie, or shall I?'

*

They waited until it began to grow dark before they set off for Elsley Road. It was foggy too, so all the street lights looked like dandelion puffs. They parked their unmarked Volvo around the corner in Tyneham Road, out of sight of the Ferris house, and Charlie parked his dog van close up behind them.

The five-storey block of flats in which Terence Wakefield had lived was no longer there, but if it had been there, it was possible that he could have been able to see them out of his third-floor window. They did not want to take even the remotest risk that some quirk in quantum superpositioning might allow him to do that.

Sabina was still staying with her aunt in Wimbledon but the Martians had lent them a spare set of keys. Forensics had still not completed their investigation of the house, pending a possible arrest. When they opened up the front door, they found the interior of the house dark and chilly and stuffy, and with the faintest lemony aroma from the chemicals that the forensic team had been using. Ghost headed immediately for the kitchen, because he could smell blood.

The kitchen had not yet been cleaned, although plastic sheeting had been spread on the floor to prevent any footprints or other evidence from being compromised. Neither Jamila nor Jerry had visited this crime scene themselves. They had seen photographs of it, but the photographs had done little to prepare them for the sight of the dried blood that had been sprayed like some grisly action painting all over the walls and the windows and the cupboard doors. It was even spattered on the ceiling.

Jamila stood in the middle of the kitchen, utterly shocked. Jerry felt like going up to her and putting his arm around her, although he knew that he couldn't. All he could do was stand beside her and say, 'Blimey.'

Ghost must have had some idea of what he was hunting for, because he circled the kitchen again and again, sniffing at the table legs and the red plastic seats of the chairs.

'He's trying to work out who regularly used this room,' Charlie explained. 'He knows that he's supposed to be trying to pick up the scent of an intruder.'

'And has he, do you think?'

'Not so far.'

When Ghost had finished sniffing under the larder door, he crossed the crinkly plastic sheeting on the floor and jumped up so that he was standing with his front paws on the rim of the stainless-steel sink. He sniffed around the edge of it, and the draining board, and then he dropped down onto all fours again. He looked up at Charlie and Charlie said, ‘View halloo, folks! He’s picked it up!’

‘So where is he going to take us?’ asked Jamila. ‘If what young Sabina told us is true, then we are already here.’

Ghost went to the kitchen door, and out into the hallway. Even before they followed him, both Jamila and Jerry caught the waft of some pungent cigarette smoke.

They left the kitchen with its blood-spattered walls and found themselves not in the hallway of the Ferris house, but in the bare cold entrance of a block of flats, with a lift in front of them and a flight of concrete steps off to their left. Smoke was still lazily curling in the air, as if somebody had only just blown it out, and they could hear the lift whining as it carried this person upstairs. The illuminated numbers stopped at 3.

Jerry sniffed, and sniffed again. ‘You know what this pen-and-inks like to me? Those Spanish Shawl fags – the ones The Fishmonger and Railway Ronnie must have been smoking. But Railway Ronnie’s had his chips in this day and age, hasn’t he? So unless it’s someone else altogether, it could well be The Fishmonger.’

‘Perhaps we will be able to kill two birds with one stone,’ said Jamila. ‘Flat 12, Terence Wakefield is supposed to live in, yes? Let us go up and find out. But not in the lift. We do not want to alert them that somebody is coming.’

Ghost was already eager to climb the steps. Jerry looked up into the gloom and said, ‘I’d have been better off joining a gym, me, instead of the Met. Less bloody exercise.’

They started to make their way up, with Ghost leading the way. They trod as softly as three mischievous children hoping to spring a surprise on their parents. When they reached the third floor, they were all breathing heavily and Jerry was desperate to cough, but he managed to suppress it.

The landing was bare except for a folding pushchair, which was propped outside the door of number 10, and a fire extinguisher. They could hear wireless music from number 11, and a couple arguing somewhere inside number 9.

Jamila drew out her pistol and Jerry drew his out too.

‘For Ghost to have tracked him here, that is all the evidence we need that whoever is in here murdered Mrs Ferris,’ said Jamila. ‘Even if he is in a wheelchair, shoot to kill. As for anybody else – if it is The Fishmonger, then shoot to kill him too. We have seen for ourselves that he is guilty of first-degree murder, no matter what world he is in.’

In the distance, they heard air-raid sirens starting up. Charlie said, ‘You’ve done it again, haven’t you, boy? Taken us back to the Blitz.’

Ghost growled in the back of his throat, but never once took his green eyes off the door of flat number 12. His tail flapped softly against the wall like a metronome counting down the seconds.

‘All set?’ asked Jamila. Jerry nodded and said, ‘Ready when you are.’

There was a bell beside the door but Jamila gently knocked because a knock sounded less threatening. Almost at once a man’s voice called out, ‘Who is it?’

‘We have come about your ration book,’ said Jamila.

‘What about it?’

‘There has been some mix-up and you have been issued the wrong one.’

‘What? I bought some bacon this afternoon and it was all right then.’

‘You will not be able to use it tomorrow.’

The door opened, and a twentyish man in a wheelchair looked around it. Instantly, Ghost bounded towards him, but as soon as he saw Ghost the man slammed the door shut. Jerry fired a shot that went through one of the lower door panels, but whether it hit the man or not, it was impossible to tell. He did

not cry out, although there was a clattering sound as if his wheelchair had collided with the wall.

‘Terence Wakefield!’ shouted Jamila. ‘Open up! Police!’

Jerry hammered on the door with his fist, and then waited for a few seconds, but there was no response. He hammered again and called out, ‘Wakefield! You’ve got till the count of three to open this door, and if you haven’t opened it by then, we’re breaking in!’

There was still no answer from inside the flat, and the door remained closed. They waited without shouting out again. They could still hear sirens moaning not far away, and now they could also hear the deep droning of bombers coming closer, and the crackle of flak exploding in the sky.

Jerry went over to the fire extinguisher and lifted it out of its bracket. Then he strode up to the door and swung the extinguisher like a battering ram. There was a deafening bang, and the door’s mid-rail was split horizontally.

He was about to swing the extinguisher a second time when the door was flung open and a thin middle-aged woman in a floral apron appeared. Close behind her, with his left elbow crooked around her neck and his right arm wrapped around her waist, was Jasper Starke. He was grinning in the same malicious way that they had seen him grinning in Old Billingsgate fish market. Close behind him came Terence Wakefield, in his wheelchair. He had a bloodstained tea towel wrapped around his left knee and he was grimacing in pain.

‘Say good evening to Tel’s beloved mama,’ said Jasper Starke. ‘The dear lady has kindly offered to accompany us out of the building.’

Both Jamila and Jerry lowered their pistols, and Charlie bent down and took hold of Ghost’s harness, because he was bristling to get at Terence Wakefield.

‘You two do not have a hope of getting away,’ said Jamila. ‘Wherever you go, whenever you go, you can be sure that we will find you.’

‘If I were you, I would not bet anything of any value on that,’ Jasper Starke told her. ‘Come on, Lizzie. Show us to the lift.’

Clutching Terence Wakefield’s mother close against his chest, he shuffled out of the front door of the flat. Halfway across the landing he stopped and stood still, so that Terence Wakefield could wheel himself out behind him, using him for cover. Then Terence Wakefield backed towards the lift and pressed the button. As soon as the door slid open, he wheeled himself inside, while Jasper Starke and his mother came after him.

‘Quick, Jerry, downstairs!’ said Jamila, and even before the lift door had closed, Jerry was clattering down the concrete steps to the entrance hall. Ghost and Charlie followed him, and then Jamila.

When Jerry reached the entrance hall, he realised their mistake. The illuminated number by the lift door was 5, which was labelled Roof Garden. Jasper Starke and Terence Wakefield had gone up, instead of down. Jerry jabbed at the button again and again, but the lift remained at 5, which probably meant that Jasper Starke had somehow jammed its door open.

‘Oh, shit,’ he said. ‘More bloody exercise.’

He had only climbed the first three steps when there was an ear-splitting explosion outside the block of flats, and the front door was blown inwards, so that it was hanging at an angle on its hinges. The small yard outside was lit up with a blinding white light, and thick grey smoke was piling up into the darkness, swarming with sparks.

‘Incendiary bomb,’ said Charlie. ‘We should be in a shelter, really.’

‘Maybe these flats have a basement,’ said Jamila. But as soon as she said that, there was another explosion, and it felt as if the whole block of flats was shaken by an earthquake. They heard ceilings collapsing up above them, and a shower of sparks came flying down the concrete steps.

‘I think we need to get the hell out of here,’ said Jerry. ‘I may still be alive in the present day but I don’t fancy being burned to death in 1941.’

‘What about those three?’ said Charlie, pointing upwards.

‘Let us just get out of here and worry about them later,’ Jamila told him.

Jerry kicked the broken front door out of the way, and then they stepped outside, shielding their faces from the intense heat of the blazing incendiary bomb. As they reached the pavement, an air-raid warden and another man were already hurrying across the road with buckets full of water.

A second-floor window opened up in the block of flats and a woman started to shout for help. ‘My husband! My husband’s been hurt! And I can’t get out!’

Jamila and Jerry looked up. Three storeys above the woman’s window, on the roof, they could see huge orange flames billowing and curling as if a dragon were lying on its back up there, breathing fire, and clouds of dense black smoke were blotting out the moon.

Part of the parapet around the roof garden had collapsed, and suddenly Terence Wakefield appeared in his wheelchair, right on the very edge of the roof. He was making no sound, but he was ablaze. He was wearing a helmet of fire on his head, with flames instead of plumage, and even through the fire, Jerry could see that his mouth was wide open in a silent scream of agony.

Jasper Starke appeared behind him, and he was burning too. Flames were leaping up from his shoulders like fiery epaulets. He stood there for a few seconds, as if he were trying to think what to do next, or praying. Then he gripped hold of the handles of Terence Wakefield’s wheelchair and pushed it off the roof, still holding on to it himself.

‘Hell’s bells!’ said the air-raid warden. Terence Wakefield landed with a crash in the road with Jasper Starke on top of him, both of them still on fire from the thermite inside the incendiary bomb. The heat of their burning was so intense that

the spokes of the wheelchair's wheels were shrivelling up like spider webs, and the tarmac on the road beneath them was melting.

Jamila and Jerry could do nothing but stand and watch them as they were gradually reduced to a tangled pile of charred flesh and blackened bones and aluminium struts.

'Saved you a job, then,' said Charlie. Ghost was sitting beside him looking unusually thoughtful. Jerry wondered if Ghost wanted to say something himself, if only he could.

'I hope Terence Wakefield's mother managed to get out of there,' said Jamila. As if she had been waiting for her cue, his mother appeared out of the entrance to the block of flats, looking dazed.

Jamila immediately went up to her, took her arm, and led her in the opposite direction from the still smouldering wreckage of her son and his wheelchair.

She twisted her head around to look up at the roof. 'They're not still up there, my boy and that horrible friend of his?'

'No,' said Jamila. 'But how did you escape?'

'Oh, they let me go as soon as they got to the roof garden. But they said I had to go down the stairs. Where are they now?'

An air-raid warden came up to them. 'You two ladies okay?'

'This lady is suffering from shock,' said Jamila.

'Come on then, love,' said the air-raid warden. 'A nice hot cuppa is what you need.'

He led her away, while Jamila turned around and saw that Jerry and Charlie and Ghost were waiting for her.

Without a word, they walked together around the corner into Tyneham Road, and there they saw their Volvo and Charlie's dog van parked. They opened their car doors, but before they climbed in they stopped for a moment and listened. Except for the endless grumbling of traffic, the night was quiet. No searchlights were criss-crossing the sky, no bombers were

droning overhead, no lurid orange fires were burning behind the rooftops, and there was no smell of acrid smoke.

‘In Pakistan, they say that those who fight fire with fire usually end up with ashes,’ said Jamila.

‘True,’ said Jerry. ‘But in the East End, they say you should always make sure that your wheelchair has a parachute.’

Jerry was unable to sleep for the rest of the night, partly because his bedroom in Lavender Gardens was unfamiliar, but mostly because of what they had witnessed at the block of flats in Elsley Road.

He kept picturing Terence Wakefield on the very edge of the roof, with Jasper Starke grasping the handles of his wheelchair, both of them wrapped in rippling flames, both of them in so much pain that they were silent. Even the loudest scream could not have described the agony they were feeling.

Then he saw both of them falling, again and again, all arms and legs and wheels on fire, and crashing into the road.

He went out into the garden to smoke a cigarette, since smoking was not allowed inside their apartments. He sat next to a plaster gnome that was holding a bottle and was supposed to be drunk.

‘I envy you, mate,’ he told him. ‘I’d do anything to be pissed as a newt right now.’

Just after eight o’clock in the morning, as he left his apartment, Jamila appeared out of hers. She looked as tired as he felt, with dark circles under her eyes. They walked together up to the station, not talking, but each aware of what the other was thinking.

Nobody else had shared all the strange investigations they had carried out together, and because of that, their experiences had brought them uniquely close together. Jamila was senior to Jerry in rank, and came from a totally different culture, but they were almost like a married couple now, in that they barely had to speak to express their feelings to each other. They had

only to raise an eyebrow or purse their lips or give the slightest shake of their heads.

They sat down in the station canteen. Jerry heaped up his plate of bacon and eggs and sausages and black pudding and grilled tomatoes, but when he sat down he was not at all sure that he had the appetite to chew and swallow them all. Jamila contented herself with a soy yogurt and a lemon tea.

‘So who do you think we ought to go after next?’ Jerry asked her.

‘I have been seriously wondering if it is necessary for us to go after any more. We have got rid of the most dangerous ones, or at least the most dangerous ones that we know of – Roger and Donald Welkin and Ronald Tuggey and Terence Wakefield and Jasper Starke.’

‘What about this “Back Stabber” who attacked that poor jeweller bloke?’

‘I have been in two minds about him. There is no question that he is guilty of Section 18 GBH, but does that merit a summary execution, even if we are executing him at some time in the past, rather than now?’

‘I think if somebody jabbed a knife up my arse, then summary execution would be the least of their worries.’

Jamila thoughtfully spooned her yogurt. Then she said, ‘If you are prepared to take the risk of taking out Scratch now, then I think we should go for it. We will both be armed, after all, and we could take at least one MP5 submachine gun. And we will have the element of surprise. The longer we leave it, the more danger there is that other innocent people like Mary Jonas and Archie Cooper will become victims.’

‘Well, fair enough,’ said Jerry. ‘But apart from the ones that we’ve topped already, we don’t have a clue how many more villains Scratch has got in his army, do we? And if he can bring murderers through from any time or parallel world that he wants to, maybe he can call up reinforcements to make up for the ones that he’s lost. We might turn up at St Oswald’s

Place and find ourselves facing John Christie or Fred West or Jack the Ripper.’

‘That is a risk that we will have to take,’ said Jamila. ‘From our last experience, we need to get in and out of that house as quickly as we can. And if any of those children are still in there, and they are not out on the streets stealing, we must first make sure that they are all safely outside.’

‘Then what? We go down into the cellar with halogen lamps and an MP5 and fill Scratch full of holes?’

‘I have been thinking very carefully about that. I have tried to find the original building plans, but without any success. We do not know the layout of the cellar, and it could be that it used to run underneath the whole length of what used to be Waterloo House, or at least part of it. If that is the case, as soon as he hears us coming, Scratch might be able to escape. Not only that, but I have been studying the medical reports that Sir Frederick Treves wrote about Joseph Merrick. The skin on the Elephant Man’s head and torso was so thickened by fibrous overgrowth that it was almost impenetrable.’

‘What are you telling me? That Scratch could be bulletproof? Jesus!’

‘We know that Matthew Merrick’s condition is even more severe than his twin, so it is possible that if we shoot him, we might wound him but not kill him. And if he is still alive, we can only presume that he will be capable of taking himself through to another world, where he is unhurt. He needs to be destroyed, Jerry. He needs to be annihilated.’

‘Yes, but how? We know that number 9 was bombed during the Blitz but we also know that even if Scratch was in the cellar when it was bombed, he wasn’t killed, even if he may have been injured. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be there now, would he? Or would he? I don’t know, this parallel world stuff is driving me doolally.’

‘We need to do to Scratch what was done to an extremely nasty politician in Pakistan.’

Jerry forked up a sausage, stared at it, and then put it back on his plate. ‘I dread to think what that was.’

‘He was blown up by a bomb in his office. You saw the state of the kitchen in which Mrs Ferris was killed. This politician’s office was worse than that. I used to have a friend who was a sub-inspector in the Balochistan Police and the word he used to describe it was “redecorated”.’

‘That’s all very well. But where are we going to get a bomb from?’

‘We had a bomb scare last summer during all the racial unrest in Redbridge. That was when I got to know Captain Vickers from the Army’s bomb disposal squadron at RAF Northolt.’

‘You certainly have some useful friends.’

‘Captain Vickers saved the life of a wonderful imam, and because of that we treated him and his men to a traditional dinner of nihari, which they loved. He has been back twice to Redbridge since then, once with his family.’

‘And you really think he’ll give us a bomb?’

‘Jerry, you seem to forget that we are police officers. It is the police who give people authority to own and store explosives. If we felt like it, we could give ourselves permission to acquire two thousand kilograms of explosives for five years.’

‘I don’t think we’re going to need that much, are we? Two thousand kilograms would blow up the whole of Kennington and half of Lambeth too.’

Jamila looked serious. ‘This will be a highly dangerous job, Jerry. I cannot pretend otherwise. But after everything that we have discovered about Scratch and his gang, I cannot see how else we can eliminate them.’

‘But they’ll still exist in all those other parallel worlds, won’t they? Just like I do and you do and everybody does.’

‘Yes, but it is not possible to move from one world to another unaided. You and I cannot do it without Ghost to guide

us. In the same way, if Scratch has gone, all the murderers he has recruited will be trapped in whatever world he last moved them to. If they happen to get caught for committing any crime, there will be no more escaping for them, no disappearing from out of their cells, not this time. At least, that is my understanding of what will happen. I could be wrong, and I could have totally misinterpreted quantum superpositioning, but that is how I see it, and that is the only way I can think of to put an end to Scratch for good and all.'

'I can't eat this,' said Jerry, putting down his fork.

Jamila took her phone out of her bag. 'Let me see if I can get in touch with Captain Vickers. I expect he will want to give us a short training session before he lets us have any explosives.'

'That's not a bad idea. The last time I handled explosives was at my seven-year-old nephew's Guy Fawkes night, and then I set fire to my sweater.'

*

It took them less than an hour to drive out north-west from London to RAF Northolt. Captain Jim Vickers was waiting for them in the high-ceilinged officers' mess. He looked about ten years younger than Jerry had imagined that he would be, slim and fit, with a snub nose and rabbit-like teeth and a neatly clipped moustache. He could have stepped out of a wartime photograph of Spitfire pilots.

'Jamila, splendid to see you,' he said. 'We must pop back to Redbridge again soon. I have such a hankering for that curry of yours. I'd offer you both a drink but if we're going to be handling C4 then I'm afraid we'll all have to be stone-cold sober. There's tea or coffee or fizzy water if you want it.'

They sat down under a painting of a Lancaster bomber flying into the sunset. 'Now then,' said Captain Vickers, 'what's all this about? I can supply you with a couple of demolition blocks and the necessary detonators, but I really need to know what your intended target is.'

‘We need explosive as part of a strictly confidential investigation,’ said Jamila. ‘It has been authorised from the very highest level. Do you know Assistant Commissioner Woburn, who directs Specialist Operations? Not even our own DCI is aware of what we are doing and how we plan to carry it out.’

She explained that they had discovered how a criminal cartel had been clandestinely using a cellar in South London as a headquarters for organised robberies, extortion, drug-dealing and child exploitation.

‘All we want to do is demolish their cellar, so that they will lose all of their assets – all of their arms and drugs and stolen property – and no longer be able to use it as their base.’

She said nothing about the leader of this ‘cartel’ hiding down in the darkness of the cellar, twenty-four hours a day, and that their real intention was not to destroy the cellar, but him. Jerry was also impressed by her nerve in invoking the name of Assistant Commissioner Woburn, although she had only implied that he had authorised the bombing, and not specifically said so.

After Jamila had explained why they needed explosives, Captain Vickers made a call to a range ammunition technician. Fifteen minutes later the technician called back to tell him that he had retrieved from the stores everything they needed, and so they left the mess and went outside, where he was waiting for them beside a khaki Land Rover. He was a burly corporal in battledress, who spoke to Jamila and Jerry in a clipped, staccato tone, as if they were the stupidest people he had ever had the misfortune to meet.

He held up three foot-long blocks of C4 explosive wrapped in transparent plastic. ‘These here are M112 demolition blocks. They are completely stable until you insert blasting caps. You can shoot them with a firearm, microwave them, or set fire to them, and they will remain inert. When we get out to the range, I will demonstrate to you the safe insertion of the blasting caps and the timer and the subsequent detonation. When they do detonate, the velocity of the explosion is eight thousand and ninety-two metres per second.’

‘Quite a bang, then,’ said Jerry.

The corporal stared at him as if he were a three-year-old, but said nothing. Then they all climbed into the Land Rover and he drove them out to the range.

It was windy out there, and when the corporal set off the explosive, they saw the flash before they heard the bang, and the puff of black smoke fled away like a ghost in a black cloak.

On the way back, Jerry explained the layout of number 9 St Oswald’s Place to the corporal, and the corporal recommended that they set the timer for sixty seconds, so that they had plenty of time to climb the stairs out of the cellar and get well clear of the building before the C4 exploded.

‘You never know... the floor could collapse and half the building might come down, so it’s better to be safe than flattened.’

He took Jamila and Jerry to the store and handed them a canvas bag containing three blocks of C4, blasting caps and a timer.

‘It’s all set up for you and ready to start ticking,’ he told them. ‘But a word to the wise. If you’re in any doubt at all about your ability to get out of range before it detonates, then don’t do it. And if you set the timer but nothing happens, don’t go back to see what the problem is. Myself, I wouldn’t let you do this, but if it’s been authorised from up above, there’s not a lot I can do about it.’

‘If and when it’s “mission accomplished”, you will be in touch, won’t you?’ put in Captain Vickers. ‘It would be good to know that we’ve been able to be of assistance in your fight against organised crime. And it would also be good to know that you’re still in one piece.’

On their way back to Lavender Hill, Jerry said, ‘This is madness. You know that, don’t you?’

Jamila nodded. ‘What Scratch is doing is madness. But like fighting fire with fire, the only way you can fight madness is with even more madness.’

*

Ghost needed a fresh scent to follow to take them back to 1941, so they took him to Dance's jewellery shop in Balham High Road, which had remained closed since Edward Dance had been robbed and assaulted.

They hoped that he would be able to pick up the scent left by Veronica Crawford or by the Back Stabber. Either would do, so long as Ghost could take them back to St Oswald's Place during the Blitz, when Scratch was still hiding in his cellar.

Ghost snuffled around the shop, and especially around the back of the counter, where Veronica had opened up the watch display case. But there was still blood on the floor from where Edward Dance had been stabbed, and Ghost seemed to find the scent around there even more distinctive. After only three or four minutes, he came out from behind the counter and crossed over to Charlie as if to say, *Got it, let's go.*

'You could follow the scent on foot to be absolutely sure that this Back Stabber was one of Scratch's gang,' said Jamila. 'But if you walk there, St Oswald's Place must be at least an hour and a half away from here. Shall we take a chance and drive there?'

'It makes sense to me,' said Charlie. 'Ghosty loves the exercise, don't you, boy? I'm not sure I'm up for it, not tonight. I've got a corn which is giving me gyp.'

Jamila and Jerry drove to St Oswald's Place in their Volvo and Charlie followed close behind in his dog van.

Jamila glanced over her shoulder at the canvas bag of C4 on the back seat, and the MP5 submachine gun lying next to it. 'I am not sure, Jerry. I was prepared to believe that this might be worth the risk, but now that we are actually doing it, I am not so certain.'

'We can always scrub it,' said Jerry.

'But what if another innocent victim is murdered, like Mary Jonas or Lilian Ferris or poor little Archie Cooper? How will we be able to live with ourselves, knowing that we could have

prevented them from being sliced to pieces, or being run over by a tram, or having their brains blown out?’

‘Let’s see if Ghost can get us back to 1941 first. Then we can make up our minds if we want to go ahead with this or not.’

They reached the corner of St Oswald’s Place and parked. A very fine drizzle was falling, and the night was unusually quiet. The wind had changed, so it was possible that the airliners that usually thundered over this part of London on their way to land at Heathrow were coming in from another direction.

Ghost jumped down from the back of his van and started to sniff around. ‘I’m just praying that he picks the scent up,’ said Charlie. ‘I really don’t fancy a four-mile walk in this weather.’

But Ghost suddenly stopped sniffing, and lifted his head, as if he were listening. Jamila and Jerry and Charlie listened too, and after a while, very faintly, they could hear that unmistakable moan of air-raid sirens.

31

One by one, the trees shrank, and one by one the street lamps went out, until St Oswald's Place was in darkness. Searchlights began to probe the sky, lighting up the elephantine bellies of the barrage balloons that were floating high above the rooftops, and in the distance they could hear the low grumbling of aircraft. Not airliners, but bombers.

Jerry looked at Jamila. 'We're here,' he said. 'Do you want to give it a go?'

'Yes. But it is night. So the children may still be inside.'

'In that case, we'll just have to get them out. Charlie, are you up for this? How about Ghost?'

'Oh, Ghost is up for anything, cock. He loves a rumble. He's trained for it. I only have to tell him to sink his teeth into somebody and it's *crunch!* Why do you think they call them canines?'

'Right,' said Jerry. 'So it's Plan A. We bust down the door. You and Charlie and Ghost locate the children and get them all out of there, and top anyone who tries to stop you. I go down to the cellar with my bag of tricks and start the timer. As soon as I do that, I'll yell out, "Sixty seconds and counting!" and we'll all get the hell out of there as quick as humanly possible.'

He went back to the Volvo, opened the boot and took out a red Enforcer battering ram. Then he lifted the bag of C4 off the back seat and slung it over his shoulder. The Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun he handed to Jamila, and she gave the cocking lever the 'HK slap' from right to left to release it

ready for firing. He paused for a split second, impressed by her nonchalant expertise.

They walked up to the black metal door of number 9. Ghost was still snuffling so it was clear that the Back Stabber had returned here after injuring Edward Dance. The sirens were moaning even louder now, and the anti-aircraft guns had started up. Jerry asked Charlie to hold his bag, and then he swung the battering ram and hit the door as hard as he could. His first blow made a loud bang, and dented the lower panel, but the door held firm.

He swung the battering ram again, and again, and again, denting the door deeper and deeper. He was sure that by now, someone inside must have realised that he was trying to break in, but it was possible that they were all hiding in the cellar with Scratch because of the air raid, and that they were not going to risk coming out.

‘Bloody hell,’ he grunted. ‘Boshers ain’t what they used to be! There should be a song about that!’

He swung the battering ram yet again, so hard that he almost pulled his arms out of their sockets. A dull, reverberating clang was followed by a slow, tortured creak, and this time the door teetered sideways, as if it were drunk, then twisted off its hinges and dropped onto the rubbish-filled floor.

Jerry dropped the battering ram and switched on his dazzling Imalent torch to light up the hallway. He took the bag of explosives back from Charlie, while Jamila climbed ahead of him over the door. She crunched her way through the broken glass and splintered window frames to the kitchen, holding up her MP5 in case anyone suddenly appeared out of the darkness. There was no light in the kitchen either, but Jerry came up behind her and shone his flashlight into it.

Jamila said, ‘Ah! *Is ne mujhe daraya!* That scared me!’

The brindled cat was sitting on the draining board. In the light of the torch its eyes were gleaming a demonic yellow and its fur was standing on end. It let out a warbling yowl before it jumped down and fled into the darkness of the larder.

‘If any kids are here, they must all be down in the cellar,’ said Jerry. ‘They wouldn’t leave them upstairs in an air raid, would they?’

Charlie had now brought Ghost into the hallway, and Ghost was sniffing eagerly at the bottom of the cellar door.

‘Whoever he could smell in that jewellery shop, he can smell *them* down there, I can tell you that for nothing.’

‘There is only one way in which we can find out who is down there,’ said Jamila.

‘Well, let’s be ultra-careful,’ said Jerry. ‘They must have twigged that there’s someone up here now, even if they didn’t hear me busting down the door.’

The three of them looked at each other. ‘Do we go for it?’ asked Jamila, hitching up the strap of her submachine gun.

‘Yes. Let’s go for it.’

Jerry opened the cellar door and swung it inwards, ducking to one side in case anybody in the cellar had a gun. He shone his flashlight down the stairs, flicking its beam from side to side, and immediately he heard a man shouting, ‘What the *fuck!*’

Next he heard at least half a dozen children chattering and squealing, and then a woman’s angry voice, ‘Who’s that up there? Have you broken in? You’re not looters, are you? You’d better get out, quick, or you’ll regret it!’

‘Air-raid wardens!’ Jamila called out. ‘We have come to check that you are all safe!’

Jesus, thought Jerry. *If they gave medals for lying, Jamila would walk off with them all.*

Footsteps came stamping up the cellar stairs, and a big bald man appeared, with curled-up ears like cheesy crisps. He was wearing a tan tweed jacket that was tightly buttoned up, but two sizes too small for him. When he reached the second-to-top step he stopped, one hand lifted to shield his eyes from Jerry’s dazzling torch.

‘Tha’s not ARP!’ he sputtered. ‘Where’s tha tin ’ats?’

Ghost was pulling at his harness so hard that he was standing on his hind legs, and he gave a long aggressive growl that signalled to Charlie he had found the man whose scent he had picked up at the jewellery shop.

‘Call yourself the Back Stabber, do you, pal?’ said Jerry.

The man reached inside his jacket and slid out a carving knife. ‘Yes, mate! Do you want to find out why?’

He stumbled up the last step towards them, holding the carving knife up high. Jerry could only guess that he had been half-blinded by the torchlight and was unable to see that Jamila was holding a submachine gun. There was a sharp crack as she hit him in the chest with a single shot. He stopped still for a split second, with a baffled expression on his face. Then he dropped his carving knife and fell backwards down the stairs, tumbling over and over like an acrobat until he hit the floor with a thump, deep down in the darkness.

The children screamed, and the woman’s voice cried out, ‘What have you done? Who are you? What have you *done*?’

‘Let us get those children out of there,’ said Jamila. ‘As soon as they are all out, Jerry, you can set the timer and we can run for it.’

Jerry lit up the stairs for Jamila so that she could clatter down first, holding her MP5. As he followed her, his torch began to illuminate the cellar, and he could see nearly a dozen children, boys and girls, all clutching each other in terror. Standing among them was Veronica Crawford, with those brunette victory rolls in her hair, her face white, her eyes blazing with anger.

‘Get out!’ she screamed. ‘Get out of here! Matthew! Matthew! They’ve shot Lesley! *Matthew!*’

Jerry shone his torch towards the back of the cellar, expecting with a prickling sense of anticipation to see Scratch make an appearance. Since Veronica had called for ‘Matthew’, it was almost certain that Scratch was Joseph Merrick’s twin brother, the Rhinoceros Man. But a grey curtain or tarpaulin

was hanging all the way across the cellar, and although he thought he saw the fabric stir, that was all.

Charlie came down the stairs with Ghost. He flapped his hands and said ‘shh-shh-shh!’ to quieten the children, some of whom were sobbing by now.

‘Come along, kids! Everything’s going to be fine! This lovely chocolate boy, his name’s Ghost, and he’s come to rescue you! All you have to do is follow him back upstairs and out into the street, and he’ll take you somewhere safe!’

Ghost gave the crumpled body of the Back Stabber a peremptory sniff, as if he were making absolutely sure that he was dead. Then he started to climb up the cellar stairs, pausing and turning around to make sure the children were following him. Charlie ushered them all to the staircase like a kindly uncle at a birthday party.

‘*Matthew?*’ Veronica repeated, only much more softly this time. Then, to Jamila and Jerry, ‘You can’t do this. Even if you are really police officers, like you said you were, you have no right. Where’s your authority? Where’s your warrant?’

Jamila pointed her MP5 at her and said, ‘Our authority is moral authority, Ms Crawford. Our warrant is the just revenge that we are seeking on behalf of all the victims that Scratch’s gang have wantonly murdered. Now, get up the stairs after those children.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Then I will shoot you too, without any compunction. We have no time to waste.’

Veronica hesitated for a moment, but when Jamila lifted the MP5 a little higher, she hitched up her long coat-tails and mounted the stairs. Jamila followed her, although when Veronica reached the top she screamed out one last time, ‘*Matthew!*’

Once Jamila had disappeared, Jerry knelt down on one knee. He laid his torch on the floor, and then he opened up the canvas bag. He took out the three blocks of C4 and carefully set the timer for sixty seconds. Before he could switch it on,

though, the grey curtain at the back of the cellar was suddenly dragged down from the ceiling and collapsed with a rumble onto the floor.

Stepping out over the crumpled curtain came the most grotesque being that Jerry had ever seen. There was no doubt that he was a man, because he had a head and a body, and two arms, and he was limping on two legs. But his head was enormous, and bubbled all over with white tumours. It looked more like a rock encrusted with barnacles than a human head, and it was so heavy that with every step the man took across the cellar floor, it wobbled from one shoulder to the other. His nostrils were distended, and even from the opposite side of the cellar, Jerry could hear his breath whistling tunelessly in and out. He wore circular amber lenses over his eyes, which had been fastened together with copper wire to make a rudimentary pair of spectacles.

His chest was so overgrown with fibrous tissue that his bottle-green velvet jacket had split and burst down its seams on both sides, revealing his pallid, lumpy skin.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded. He coughed, and spat, and coughed again. ‘What have you done to Lesley? Where’s Veronica? There’s an air raid on! Where are the kids?’

‘I’m police,’ said Jerry, trying to sound calm, although the sight of this monstrous man made him feel like running up the stairs as fast as he could. Fortunately, it seemed that Scratch was deterred by the bright light from Jerry’s torch, because he came no nearer than halfway across the cellar.

‘Ha! You’re a Peeler, are you? You don’t look like one! But I can soon tie *your* laces for you! You’ve slid, have you? I don’t know how you’ve slid here on your own, without me to fetch you, and in any case I never would have fetched a Peeler, of all people. But you’ve no right to start messing with me, my fine fellow. And now you’re going to pay the penalty!’

‘Sorry, mate,’ said Jerry. ‘There’s only one of us going to be paying a penalty around here, and that’s you.’

With that, he switched on the timer that was taped to the C4 demolition blocks, and stood up.

‘Where would you like me to slide you to?’ Scratch croaked at him. He coughed again, and then he said, ‘Hey? Where would you like to go? Somewhere long ago and far away? How about the Great Fire of London? How about the plague years?’

‘How about you get knotted?’ Jerry retorted. He quickly checked that the red numerals on the timer were counting down – 57-56-55 – and then he picked up his torch and started to clamber up the stairs.

Scratch gave a high, rasping howl, and when he was nearly at the top of the staircase, Jerry felt as if somebody had seized his ankles and was trying to pull him back down. Not only down, but *through*, into another place altogether. It reminded him of a haunted house he had once visited, where you had to push your way through a narrow suffocating aperture lined with blankets to get into the next room.

‘Ghost!’ he shouted out, and almost at once Ghost came lolloping along the hallway and barked at him. Immediately, the grip on his ankles was released, and he stumbled into the hallway, treading on broken shards of window glass.

He could see that Jamila and Charlie were outside, but Veronica was still looking back in through the doorway.

‘What’s happened?’ she demanded, as he and Ghost came running out. ‘What have you done to Matthew?’

‘Forty seconds to go!’ Jerry shouted at her. ‘If that!’

‘What do you mean?’ Veronica shrieked. ‘What do you mean “forty seconds to go”?’

‘Just get clear!’

‘Have you planted a bomb? Is that what you’ve done?’

‘Get yourself clear!’ Jerry repeated, crossing over St Oswald’s Place to join Jamila and the children.

‘But I love him!’ Veronica screamed at him.

With that, she ran back in through the doorway, and was swallowed up by the darkness.

‘Oh, shit,’ said Jerry, still panting.

‘Maybe it will not go off,’ said Jamila.

‘Maybe not. But even if it doesn’t, you know what that corporal told us. Don’t go back and see why it hasn’t, because there’s always a chance that it might.’

The searchlights were still flicking across the sky, but the sound of enemy aircraft had died away and all they could hear now was fire engine and ambulance bells, and people shouting.

‘This must be the longest sixty seconds in history,’ said Jerry.

They waited a few seconds more, and then they heard an ear-splitting explosion, as if the night itself had cracked in half. The ground floor of number 9 burst apart in a barrage of bricks, which tumbled and bounced all across the road. Through this barrage, Scratch was blown upwards like a missile. Although his legs were torn to bloody shreds, his arms were wrapped tightly around Veronica, or what was left of Veronica. She still had her victory rolls on top of her head, but she had no face, and her intestines were trailing down behind her.

Scratch and Veronica dropped down again into the depths of the cellar, and the whole of number 9 collapsed on top of them, leaving nothing but a heap of rubble and a cloud of smoke and dust.

The children were gathered together on the far side of St Oswald’s Place, most of them too shocked even to cry.

‘Mission accomplished, I’d say,’ said Jerry, although he was finding it hard to hear his own voice. ‘It’s true that number 9 was bombed during the Blitz, but not by the Jerry that everybody thinks it was.’

‘Now we have to work out what to do with all these children,’ said Jamila. ‘Look at them, they are all so

frightened. We do not even know what parallel worlds that each of them might have come from.'

Charlie came up. 'Let's leave it to Ghost. He's the only one who seems to know the way from one world into another.'

Ghost was circling around the children now, nuzzling them and licking their hands, and showing each of them how affectionate he could be. The children were stroking him and talking to him and one little girl gave him a hug.

The all-clear sounded. Jerry looked back at the wreckage of number 9 and then at Jamila. Neither of them spoke, but then they didn't have to.

They walked back around the corner, and their car was still parked there, as well as Charlie's dog van. Early-morning buses and taxis were driving past, and the sky was beginning to glow a pale orange.

Jerry turned around, and Ghost was trotting around the corner, looking pleased with himself. Behind him came all the children, eight boys and three girls. They were all shabbily dressed in outdated clothes, and they all looked in need of a bath and a hot breakfast. Some of them still had the streaks of tears on their cheeks.

They were following Ghost, though, as if they were walking at last into a new and happy world.

About the Author



GRAHAM MASTERTON is best known as a writer of horror and thrillers, but his career as an author spans many genres, including historical epics and sex advice books. His first horror novel, *The Manitou*, became a bestseller and was made into a film starring Tony Curtis. In 2019, Graham was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Horror Writers Association. He is also the author of the Katie Maguire series of crime thrillers, which have sold more than 1.5 million copies worldwide.

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