

Herman's History

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Table of Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter One

Herman was surrounded by plankton.

He sat in City Hall and, just like the rest of the low-grade administrative staff in the teeming office, he was hunched over a cramped desk.

The large, open-plan office had plenty of windows, but a nearby office block obscured the sky. By necessity, the neon strip lighting had to be kept blazing all day. It was blazing now, bombarding his young flesh with low-level radiation, draining it of health and vitality. He was twenty-nine, but in a couple of years he'd look thirty-nine, and by then he would be as pallid and sickly as all the other common drudges – the semi-transparent toiling minions, the aimless fodder of giant corporations and government bodies . . .

The plankton.

A tenancy application for a city-owned apartment lay on his desk. His job was to process it so that some poor homeless sap could get out of the wind and rain. However, there was a problem. The application form had been filled out in the most hopeless scrawl. Only the name was fully legible – J. Broughton. Everything else was going to require time and energy to decipher.

Herman took J. Broughton's demand for time and energy personally. J. Broughton had not considered Herman's situation before complaining about his own. The tide of paperwork here rose twice a day, just like a real tide, and never failed to leave behind stacks of files on his desk. On account of J. Broughton's blatant lack of consideration, the stacks would be higher by the end of the day than they normally were, and Herman would be even more exhausted than usual. J. Broughton, it seemed, believed Herman's time and energy were of no great importance. Apparently, J. Broughton felt Herman was his private dogsbody.

But where there's life (even if it's only plankton) there's hope and Herman's heart beat a little faster when he noticed that the mail clerk had not stamped J. Broughton's application form – an omission which meant it hadn't been officially received and therefore . . .

It could be safely disposed of!

Of course, throwing the form away would also require time and energy. The open-plan office was constantly scanned by Fennimore, his line manager, a creature several notches up on the evolutionary ladder. Herman needed Fennimore to be looking the other way before he could safely dispose of the form.

He opened another bundle of files and shuffled the papers.

But doing this actually drew Fennimore's malignant gaze. Herman felt those small but bright eyes piercing him, as if he were already as transparent and defenceless as his colleagues. And what's more, now that he had drawn his boss's attention he seemed to have singled himself out for extra scrutiny. The minutes passed and Herman could see from the reflection in his monitor screen that Fennimore's fascination with his cowering back was undiminished.

He made himself look busy by reading a letter from a disgruntled tenant. The handwriting was almost as bad as J. Broughton's. Possibly worse in some places. Still, painfully picking out the words, one by one, passed the time while he waited for a break in the surveillance.

But would that break ever come?

Herman suddenly found himself in the grip of office paranoia. Did Fennimore know J. Broughton's form hadn't been stamped? Was this a set-up to entrap him?

Wasn't it the case City Hall were always looking for an excuse to shed staff?

Yes it was!

His resolve broke and with his shoulders slumped in defeat, he began to process the form.

City Hall, Fennimore *and* J. Broughton had won.

Herman's phone cheep-cheeped.

He picked it up and intoned, 'Finance, Section Three.'

'What?' A voice barked from the other end. 'Herman? That you?'

Herman lowered his own voice. 'Hello Uncle.' He had been informed about his Uncle Sonny's court case by Auntie Cleopatra. The charge? Grievous bodily harm, of course. It could never be anything else. And there was never any doubt in anyone's mind that Sonny would and should be sent to prison. Herman smiled as he asked perkily, 'So, are you in *Winson Green* now?'

'No, they put me in the fucking *Scrubs*.'

'Oh, London then. Nice. I'll have to come and visit you – perhaps.'

'No, stay where you are! I want you to look after my house.'

'Your house? Auntie Cleo can do that.'

'No, she can't. My damn sister's useless. She can't look after anything.'

'She looks after Uncle Oliver. She manages that, doesn't she?'

'Yeah? Why's he been at death's door for ten years?'

'Because he's really sick?'

'Just listen! She's got the key, so get it off her and move in.'

'What?'

'Get the key and move in. Look after my house. If you're living there, the place won't get broken into. I've already called Cleo and told her you're coming.'

'What for?'

'The fucking key, boy. Keep the place safe and tidy for me. And don't let the bastards cut the electric off! Pay the bill . . . I'll give you the money.'

Herman was too affronted by that claim to respond. Instead, he listened to the background noises of Wormwood Scrubs Prison – echoing voices, metal doors slamming and vicious laughter.

Sonny went on, 'You're stuck in that pokey little apartment of yours, aren't you, boy? You should be grateful to live in a proper house for once. In fact, you should pay me rent for the privilege . . . shouldn't you, Herman . . . ? Herman? Hey!'

'Still here.' Herman chuckled with pleasure. 'And yeah, I promise, when I can afford it, I'll pay you rent. Okay?'

Sonny's voice softened a little. 'Herman, you're different from the rest of them. You can be trusted to stand up for yourself. I like that. Want to know something?'

'Hm?'

'When I'm gone, the house is yours.'

Herman took a moment to swallow this, the biggest insult to his intelligence so far.

He murmured drily, 'Don't talk like that.'

'And don't forget my car!' Abruptly, Uncle Sonny's tone was threatening – its default mode. He was talking about his taxi cab. 'Don't let anyone take it! Sodding bastards. And don't you touch it either! That's my living. And if anybody comes burgling me, kick them out of their fucking shoes! You're big enough, Herman.'

Sonny's mood changed again. You could almost hear the switch being flicked. 'You're a good boy really.' Yes, the old psychotic was waxing sentimental. 'The star of the family. The one I could see something in. Remember, Herman, when I'm gone, the house is . . .'

Herman was thinking that Sonny was right about one thing – his apartment was pokey. And then, it was situated on the Dudley Road, which was four lanes wide and never slept. It was also situated over *Donny and Mo's*, a busy pizza joint.

But now he was starting to get a brilliant idea.

If he were to move into Uncle Sonny's house, as he was being so ardently petitioned to do, he could let the old apartment out. That way, he'd get a good night's sleep while some other sucker paid him good money for the company of roaring trucks and hollering pizza makers.

Yes, there was no doubt about it – that was a brilliant idea.

'Tell you what,' Herman said, 'I'll move in tomorrow. I'll kill the burglars with my bare hands if I have to.'

'You'd better, or else.'

'And I promise, no wild parties.'

Herman could almost picture Uncle Sonny's round, dead eyes swivel in their sockets. 'You watch what you do with my property, boy! Any damage and I'll fucking well . . .'

'Come on, I'm joking. If you're leaving it to me, why wouldn't I look after it?'

But Sonny didn't do complex reasoning. Instead he began to remind him that Aunty Cleopatra had the keys.

Herman hurriedly put the phone down, cutting off the coarse, hectoring voice. He had just noticed Fennimore was engaged in conversation and facing in the opposite direction.

He seized the moment and screwed J. Broughton's application form into a tiny ball.

Savouring his victory, he casually tossed the ball into the waste paper basket.

Ping!

Fennimore's head span round. The little black eyes were rapidly searching, probing, scanning . . . but there was nothing to see. Herman was already pretending to examine another form.

It seems J. Broughton hadn't been so lucky after all.

Chapter Two

Herman spent his lunch break in the office library, researching squatters' rights. Two years – the length of his Uncle's stretch in prison – would not entitle him to make a legal claim to the house. He'd need twenty years. That, of course, was how long Uncle Sonny *should* be locked up for. But there you go, it was a broken legal system. *Oh, well*, Herman told himself, *at least I'll get rent from the flat.*

After work, he took the bus to his Aunty and Uncle's apartment. They lived on the twelfth floor of a high-rise block. One of many floating in the exhaust haze of the traffic-choked, litter-strewn backside of the city.

Aunty Cleopatra let him in, smiling broadly, her wide face framed by a black bang-cut nylon wig. She had just finished her shift at the local supermarket and was dressed in the company's lime-green uniform.

Herman simply wanted to collect the keys and leave, but Cleopatra didn't give him a chance. Talking all the while, she grabbed his arm and led him down the hallway. The deep, faux wool carpet sucked at his feet and the crimson wall paper seemed to intensify the cloying heat. He was already tired after a hard day at the office, now he felt the last of his strength drain away.

'You need feeding, Herman.'

'Don't fuss, Aunty.'

'What fuss? Your Uncle can't keep anything down these days. You can have his dinner.' She began to shout at her husband before she'd opened the living room door. 'Look who's here, Ollie, and he's thinner than a rake now, ain't he?'

'Really, I shouldn't,' Herman protested as Cleo gently pushed him into the livingroom. Thankfully, the large windows were open and the faint breeze, carrying the distant thud of electronic jungle music and the hum of traffic, was just cool enough to revive his senses.

It took a moment before he located Uncle Oliver. He was sunk in an armchair that was upholstered in brown nylon. His face had the colour and texture of an ancient pie crust.

'Hello, our Herman,' he piped and gave Herman a rictus grin.

'Hello, Uncle. Nice evening, isn't it?'

'It is. Most balmy and clement.'

'You're looking better, what they got you on?'

'Oh, that stuff!' Cleo said. 'It's killed his appetite dead, hasn't it, Ollie?'

He nodded. '*Theodinnizine* – ever heard of it?'

'No.'

'Hey, don't start him talking about it!' Cleo yelled. 'It'll kill your appetite too.'

Uncle Oliver stared at him, his head tilted to one side, and said, 'Sit down, Herman, you looked pooped. Your aunty will rustle up your dinner.'

'I've told him he can have yours.'

'That's right, Cleo,' he smiled wanly. 'I might have a bite of something tomorrow.'

Aunty Cleo was already stepping into the kitchen, which lay beyond a hanging

veil of coloured plastic strips. 'We can only hope and pray.' She set to work ripping off the packaging of ready meals.

Uncle Oliver, who did not have a life outside of his medical treatment, began to tell Herman about *Theodinnizine*, while Aunty Cleo, yelling above the boxed-in moan of the microwave, fired off random questions about his girlfriend and his job. As he answered, Herman began to notice his life didn't sound any more interesting than Uncle Oliver's.

They ate on lap trays in the livingroom, while the television shouted in one corner. Uncle Oliver looked on with an indulgent smile as Herman devoured his evening meal.

After they had eaten, Herman said, 'I'd best be going, I'm having a drink with friends.'

'You enjoy yourself while you can, Herman,' Uncle Oliver counselled, his reedy voice cracking. 'Christ knows, I wish I had.'

'No need to take the Lord's name in vain,' Aunty Cleopatra said crossly. 'Haven't you've had your fair share of morphine today?'

'Theodinnizine, dear.'

'Oh by the way,' Herman remarked. 'Uncle Sonny called. He wants me to take care of his house. I'd best take the keys with me now – as I'm here.' Apart from the blare of the television, silence descended upon the room. Cleopatra looked at him blankly. He asked, 'Hasn't Uncle spoken to you? He told me he'd phoned and explained everything.'

Cleopatra broad cheeks puffed up. 'That's right – he wants you dusting and cleaning for him. I never thought you'd listen to that rubbish.'

'I don't mind.'

Her tone hardened. 'Don't you have better things to do?'

'I suppose, but –'

'A healthy young lad like you shouldn't be doing housework. You should be out dancing and drinking and courting.'

'I agree, but Uncle has asked me to do it, as a favour. And it's not his fault he's in prison.'

Uncle Oliver began to laugh, but fell silent before Herman could join in. Cleo's heavy features had taken on a thundery cast. 'What are you talking about? He knocked a man's teeth out. It was his best customer too, that's how mad he is.'

'Just give the boy the keys, Cleo,' Uncle Oliver murmured soothingly. 'And he'll bring them back when he gets sick of housework, won't you, Herman?'

'Yes.'

'And it won't be long before you get sick of housework, will it?'

'No.'

'There you are, Cleo.'

Aunty Cleopatra glowered at him. 'If he wants to do good works, why doesn't he buy that poor man a set of new teeth?'

Uncle Oliver didn't answer and Herman sensed it was better to remain silent.

The seconds passed painfully. Cleo's chunky fingers began to drum against the arm of her chair and that made the seconds pass even more painfully. However, Herman simply was not about to budge. He couldn't miss the chance to rent his apartment out for a couple of years. In fact, he already had the extra income pretty well spent. There were too many things that needed upgrading and refurbishing in his life, not least his relationship with his girlfriend.

With this in mind, he settled back into his chair and smiled pleasantly, just like the

drumming of his aunty's fingers was music to his ears.

When he stretched out his legs, a moment later, as if he were settling down for the rest of the evening, Cleo jumped up and snatched a bunch of keys off the top of the television. 'I expect the place will be in a shocking state.' Her voice quivered – she'd always had a shocking temper.

'It probably is,' he said, gingerly taking the keys. 'So I thought I might do some decorating too.'

'Decorating?' She was outraged.

'Sure.'

'What you talking about, you fool?'

'Shush, Cleo,' Uncle Oliver cooed.

She wouldn't be mollified. 'Sonny won't thank you,' she reproved scornfully, 'and he'll have it in a filthy state again after a few days.'

'How do you know?'

'I've seen it happen. I saw how clean used to be before he stole it off his so-called wife.'

'Debbie? He didn't steal it. She left it him in her will.'

'You think she knew what she was doing? She was sick in mind and body.'

'Yes, it was strange wasn't it? They didn't know each other that long.'

'They both loved music,' Uncle Ollie said softly. 'And music is the food of love.'

The reference to food reminded Herman that Sonny had once worked as a chef, until he stabbed someone. 'He probably did the cooking for her,' he remarked. 'Maybe that was the way to her heart.' As he said this, something clicked into place. 'Hey, here's a thought. You may have a point, Aunty. He might have stolen it. He might have put poison in her food to get his hands on the house.'

'Poison?' Cleopatra echoed dimly. Herman could actually see her asking herself – *Now why didn't I think of that?*

'Just an idea.' Herman began to make a move for the door. He couldn't wait to start searching the house for evidence. If there was any chance of a murder conviction, then Uncle Sonny would stay inside for the rest of his life and Herman could occupy the house for the requisite twenty years after all. He could be a householder! 'Right, I'm off.'

Cleopatra's eyes narrowed. 'For a drink with friends?'

'For a night on the tiles,' Herman assured her, thinking he would start his search for empty poison bottles in Sonny's kitchen. 'Well, wish me luck.'

Rejuvenated by hope and eager expectation, Herman left the flat and took a bus to the other side of town, where the streets were lined by mature plane trees and the neat, redbrick houses boasted front gardens that weren't always full of litter and empty beer cans.

Uncle Sonny's was a large Edwardian end-of-terrace house. Inside, a few sticks of pretty furniture and some delicate ornaments were all that was left of Debbie.

She had been forty, a nurse, divorced and childless. She and Uncle Sonny had met at a local pub. He moved in two weeks later and they had enjoyed a six-month relationship before she got sick with cancer and died within weeks of the diagnosis. She had left him everything and there were no relatives to contest the will.

That was five years ago and now the rooms and furniture were coated by five years' worth of tobacco smoke and alcohol stains – Sonny's only contribution to the decor. Everything else was where Debbie had left it. Herman knew this not because he had visited the house before, but because he knew Sonny. His uncle had no interest in anything outside himself. He wouldn't have bothered moving anything around.

What Debbie had seen in him impossible to imagine, unless she had expected him to put her out of her misery. And actually, taking Sonny into her home as a means of committing suicide would have made far more sense than taking him in as a lover . . .

Herman's thoughts turned back to the theoretical poison.

He proceeded to the kitchen and was about to begin a thorough search for the evidence amongst the bottles under the sink when he heard a knock.

Chapter Three

Herman opened the front door to a young woman, dressed in pink jogging bottoms and a fiercely white jacket. She had the build of a slim teenager, but her face looked much older. Her hair was drawn back tight to give her a super-economy facelift.

‘Is Sonny in?’

‘No, he’s not.’

‘I’m Shandra. He knows me. Can I wait for him? It’s important.’

‘All right then.’

Shandra was familiar with the layout of the house and she found her way to the living room without directions. ‘God, I’m fucking wrecked.’ She perched on the sofa, making her narrow frame occupy as little space as possible.

‘Why are you wrecked?’

‘I’ve been working, ain’t I?’

‘Really? Me too. What do you do?’

She looked at him intently. ‘Who are you?’

‘Herman. Sonny’s my uncle. I’m living here now.’

‘No way!’

‘Want a cup of tea?’

‘Tea?’ The notion seemed to surprise her. ‘Yeah, all right. Got a smoke?’

‘I don’t smoke.’

‘You don’t smoke,’ Shandra exclaimed. ‘Why not?’

‘Bad for the lungs. And it costs.’

But Shandra could not seem to follow this. She shook her head. ‘I’m desperate, man.’

‘Do you have milk and sugar with your tea?’

‘Um? I suppose . . . have you got coffee instead?’

‘Yes, I’ve got coffee too.’

‘Two sugars then, in coffee and low fat milk, but only if you’ve got it. I really need a drink, guy. They’ve just blown up my flat.’

Herman had been about to go through into the kitchen. He stopped dead and asked, ‘They blew your flat up?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Who did that?’

‘The city authorities did.’

‘What? You mean that condemned tower block in the *Blankenhall* district?’

‘Yeah.’

Herman was beside himself. ‘But they said in the paper they were going to blow it up next week!’

‘Yeah, I know!’

‘God damn. I wanted to see that. The useless paper got the dates mixed up. Idiots!’

‘No, no. They blew it up earlier than they said they would for health and safety reasons, because they didn’t want a massive crowd standing around the place and

getting injured.’

Herman groaned in disgust. ‘That’s the City for you.’

He had been following the *Blankenhall* story with interest. Over the years the city authorities had used the apartment blocks in *Blankenhall*, a deprived district on the edge of town, as a dump for the borough’s least desirables – the drug pushers, pimps and prostitutes. In this way they had created a running sore. To solve the problem, they were evicting the undesirables and then blasting the apartment blocks to pieces, one after the other, to clear the area completely for redevelopment, which would then in turn attract a superior grade of resident. The result was that the undesirables were being scattered all over the boroughs to sow misery and heartache everywhere else.

And here was one such undesirable, right here in his living room. Herman wouldn’t have minded so much if he’d been able to witness the demolition in person, but even that small pleasure had been denied him.

‘Yeah, they’re right bastards,’ Shandra agreed. ‘They were good flats. There was nothing wrong with them and they blew them up. They’re mad in City Hall.’

‘They know how to cause trouble, I’ll say that.’

‘The whole thing just dropped into a heap, like the first one did.’

‘I missed the first one too,’ Herman remarked sadly.

‘But they’re doing them all!’ She exclaimed.

‘Yeah, but what chance do you stand if they don’t stick to the day they give you?’

Shandra looked at him. ‘What I mean is, they’re doing them all. There’s no way to get a place in any of the other blocks.’

‘Oh, I see. You’re looking for another place then?’

A troubled look passed over Shandra’s roughened features. ‘Well, we got a place over in *Heath Town*. Maybe.’

‘Heath Town? That’s not so different from *Blankenhall*, is it?’

‘It’s not so nice. Then again, they’ll never blow it up, I don’t think.’

Herman sighed. ‘At least not in our lifetime.’

‘But what’s wrong with Heath Town is that we can’t get the flat till tomorrow.’

‘Why is that?’

‘The landlord’s got *Rentokil* booked for today.’

‘So where you staying tonight then?’ Herman asked without much curiosity.

Shandra looked at him like he was stupid. ‘That’s why I came to see Sonny.’

‘Ah.’ Herman turned and went into the kitchen.

‘Sonny’s sick,’ he shouted, as he put the kettle on.

‘What? Where is he? Upstairs?’

‘No, he’s at my aunty’s.’

‘Aunty? Which aunty?’

‘Cleopatra.’

‘Who?’

‘Cleopatra.’

‘Who’s she?’

‘My aunty. Cleopatra.’

‘Is he there then?’

‘Who?’

‘Sonny!’

‘Yeah. He’s at Cleopatra’s. In Dudley.’

‘Dudley? What’s the address?’

‘I can’t tell you.’ Herman came back into the room.

‘Why not?’

‘Orders. Auntie Cleopatra said no visitors.’

‘No visitors?’

‘He mustn’t be disturbed.’

‘Is he really bad, then?’

‘Pretty bad. Though he was looking better the last time I saw him. Peaceful, like.’

Shandra knotted her brows in confusion. That didn’t sound much like Sonny.

‘What I mean is, when will he be back from his aunty’s?’

‘No, not his aunty’s, my aunty’s. Cleo’s his sister. He won’t be back for a bit, I shouldn’t think. But then, I don’t really know. I don’t like to pry. It’s his business, isn’t it?’

‘But he should tell you, if you’re stuck here on your own.’

‘I don’t mind. I’m only looking after the place while he’s away. If he came home tomorrow, I’d be gone like a shot. I shouldn’t want to outstay my welcome by one second.’

‘That’s good of you. And your aunty’s good to look after Sonny. You’ve got a decent family, haven’t you?’

‘Oh, they’re lovely. The lot of them.’

‘You must be upset about Sonny being sick.’

‘Yeah, but it could have been worse for him. His brain could have been affected. Terrible, isn’t it, that Alzheimer’s?’

‘What?’ Shandra hadn’t heard of that drug.

‘But as is it, it’s only his lungs,’ Herman smiled.

‘Lungs?’

‘Oh yeah, I forgot. And heart too.’

‘Both at the same time?’

‘I know, what are the chances, eh? I mean, you can’t just pin something like that down to his smoking and drinking thirty years non stop. Strange.’

Shandra nodded with a faraway look. The reference to smoking and drinking had set off a private train of thought. She frowned hard. Somehow, another thought had occurred to her. ‘I thought you said he’d be back today.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ The kettle had boiled and Herman returned to the kitchen. He started shouting again, while he made the coffee. ‘You asked whether you might come in and wait, and I said yes, because there is a slim chance that he’ll come back today. Except, I didn’t say that last bit. But I meant it, see?’

‘No.’

‘Because there is a chance he will be back today, maybe. Now do you see?’

‘But he’s really sick, isn’t he?’

‘Yeah, but that doesn’t stop him from – ’ Herman returned to the living room, carrying two cups of coffee, ‘ringing every other day, threatening to be back tomorrow.’ He put the coffee down on the table and sank into the armchair opposite Shandra. ‘He did that only yesterday. Rang, threatening to come home. Mind you, I doubt he *will* come today. He’s only ever actually come back once, about a month ago. I was sitting right here, where I am now, talking to him, telling him how great it was to see him again and that I’d be packing in a couple of minutes, and he says *no, go and pack now, straightaway, and get out of my sight*. So, I go upstairs and packed and came back down with my suitcase, and guess what?’

‘What?’

‘He’d gone again. He’d felt sick and gone back to Auntie Cleopatra’s.’

‘But he said he was coming back today, did he?’

‘Yes he did. So wait here if you like and see. But don’t hold your breath. Give it

till five. If he's not here by five then there's no way he'll come, because five is a cut off point for him. Don't ask me why, it's just that he never comes back after five.'

Shandra shook her head and sucked her teeth in exasperation. 'Sonny!' She sighed. As if that summed it all up. She took a good long slurp of coffee, eyeing Herman over the brim of the cup. There had been a hardness about her glance up until then. Now her glance wasn't so hard.

'See, I'm here today because I was going to ask him if I could stay.'

'Oh?'

'Only for tonight.' Her eyes dropped modestly. 'He's let me stay before.'

'Has he?'

'Yeah, loads of times, when I needed to crash.' She favoured him with her first smile.

'He's never said.'

'Oh well, he wouldn't.' Her tone was dry.

'Anyway, it was very charitable of you to come visit him.'

Shandra was indignant. 'I didn't stay for free!'

'Ah, how much did you pay for a night?'

The question clearly shocked Shandra. Words failed her for a moment. 'No – he paid me.' Herman stared at her in amazement, and she coloured a tiny little bit. She added: 'I used to help him round the place.'

'Right. I get you. Me, I don't need a cleaner. I've always kept my place tidy.'

'Your place now, is it?'

'Here? It will be eventually. He left it me in his will.'

Shandra found this information fascinating, and horrible by turns. 'So Sonny thinks he might die?'

Herman sighed wistfully. 'I don't know, I never asked. All he told me was I'm in his will. Honestly though –' genuine sorrow overtook him now, 'I can't believe he's written one.'

'Why not? He's really boss clever, isn't he?'

'What?' Herman couldn't disguise his scorn.

'He knows every road in the city.'

'Oh, yeah, every road. Well, I'd never say he was an underachiever. He's always had money.'

'That's right . . . got his new number?'

'And yet, he only works when it suits him, you know. As he says, he takes every day as a challenge, and the challenge is to be as relaxed and chilled out by the evening as he is in the morning. That's the secret of his success.'

'You see, if I can call him, I could find out if he wants to see me one last time. He might do, if he's not too sick.'

'I'll mention it to him next time we speak, and if he wants to call he can call you, can't he?'

'Mobile's broke.'

'Then when you get a new one, drop by here with the number and I'll pass it on.'

Shandra groaned theatrically, as if getting a new mobile phone would involve far more work than he could possibly imagine. 'It'd be easier if I saw him first.'

'What's this obsession with seeing him?'

'What?'

'You got something to show him?'

She gave him a sly smile. 'Maybe.'

Herman smiled back. 'Yeah – you want to remind him of the good times, eh? I

suppose there's a chance he'll leave you something in his will. Christ, that wouldn't surprise me. Show the family what he really thought of them. It'd be the equivalent of leaving everything to the cat. On the other hand, I would be even more surprised if he put a will together because that would take a moment to think things through and also an acquaintance with the law beyond speed restrictions and getting arrested for threatening behaviour. And even there, his understanding is a bit hazy. But still, taking all that for granted, he would have to write his thoughts down, and I just can't see him doing that.' Suddenly, Herman was sick of talking about Sonny. Owning this house would make his life ten times better, but his uncle just had to be a semi-literate sociopath, didn't he? A semi-literate sociopath, moreover, with the heart and lungs of a horse.

Shandra fidgeted so much while he spoke that she had to put her coffee down on the table. At one point she even crossed her eyes as if her impatience were driving her crazy and as soon as he lapsed into silence she blurted out in desperation, 'So you can't give me his number then?'

'Look, even *I'm* not supposed to phone him. He's told me not to. I have to wait for him to call. But when he calls I'll mention you, okay? I can't say when that will be, because Aunt Cleopatra gets angry about him making phone calls. She's a nurse, see, and she wants him to rest his heart and lungs as much as possible. I dread to think what she'd do if he got disturbed by someone phoning. And she's right to make a fuss really, because when someone calls him rather than the other way round he gets a shock to the heart from the phone going off without warning. And then he has to use his lungs to answer it, doesn't he? An incoming call is a lose-lose situation for Sonny. Which just goes to show that it's better to have a healthy body and a broken phone, like you, rather than the other way round, like Sonny.'

After a pause Shandra said, 'When he does call, you ask him and he'll tell you.'

Disarmed, Herman asked. 'Tell me what?'

'That I used to stay here and that I helped him round the place rather than pay him rent.'

'Yeah?'

'You might not think it, but there's loads of things I could do for you.'

Herman sipped his coffee. 'Well, if you've got no money . . . ' Shandra shook her head vigorously. 'Then why don't you go and stay with your parents for tonight?'

She was aghast. 'Can't!'

'Oh, are they dead?' He asked indifferently.

'Nah,' she said, and then reflected on this fact for a moment. 'But they might as well be, because if I go back they're just going to say that I've stood on my own two feet for years without any help from them and so what am I doing coming back? And fair enough, I wouldn't have an answer.'

Herman finished his coffee and put the cup down. 'Surely they wouldn't mind your staying with them for one night, would they?'

Shandra twined her ponytail around her thin fingers. 'They'd moan at me to get out and find a job.'

'They sound sensible.'

She groaned. 'I'm busting for a fag, guy.'

Herman shrugged. 'Okay, if you really must, go ahead and have a cigarette.'

'But you don't smoke, do you?'

'No, but I'll put up with the fumes just this once.'

'I mean, you haven't got any cigarettes, have you?'

'I found a huge big box of them in the spare room, with all the packaging in

arabic, so I imagine they were specially imported.'

'Where are they?'

'Oh, I threw them away.'

'What?' Shandra was incredulous. It was like he had cast away the elixir of life.

'I was worried that if Sonny came back he'd smoke them all and have a relapse.

He's my uncle, isn't he? I want to do my bit to keep him healthy.'

'But now I've got to go and get some, haven't I?'

'Well go then. There's a shop down the road. Don't worry, I'll let you back in.'

Shandra wailed in exasperation. 'But fags cost money and I'm not making any here, am I?'

'Oh, I see. All right, tell me what brand you smoke and I'll go and get a packet for you.'

'Marlborough Lite. I'll come with you.'

'No, you stay here. It's all right – there's no money in the house.'

'Hey!'

'I mean, there won't be any money in the house, because I'll be taking it with me to the shop to buy your cigarettes.'

'Well, I'll wait then. Any chance of a takeaway?'

'No, I've already eaten.'

Chapter Four

He woke beside her next morning in the main bedroom.

But Shandra's presence was unbearable to him by now, even while she was unconscious. He got up, dressed and went downstairs. His phone chirped while was brewing coffee in the kitchen.

It was Aunt Cleopatra. 'Get ready for a shock, Herman.'

Herman stifled a yawn, 'I'm ready.'

'Sonny's dead.'

'I don't believe it!'

'I know, child, I know.'

'It just isn't fair.'

'But these things do happen, God help us.'

'What did happen? Was he murdered?'

'No darling, he had a stroke in the night.'

So, it was the brain that did it! The dark horse of Uncle Sonny's internal organs. 'Doesn't seem right – he had such a bad heart.' *Metaphorically too*, he added silently.

'He had a rotten heart, bless him.' Cleopatra burst into tears. And as she wept she babbled. Herman hardly listened at first. He was too exasperated. The house had already slipped through his fingers. Gradually the noise in his ear became more repetitive. The same words kept vibrating down the line. They hinged on a matter of importance. Something more important than anything else . . .

'The keys.'

'What was that, aunty? Sorry, my mind's in a whirl.'

'Bring the keys, sweetheart. Bring the keys.'

'Keys? What keys?'

'The house keys. Sonny's house.'

'Oh yeah. Sure. I'll pop them over.'

'Now?'

'Now? No, not now, Aunty. I'm all broken up. I'll drop by your place this evening, after work.'

'But you see, I want to get the place spic and span.'

'There's no need.'

'No, Herman, I'd feel so guilty if I didn't clean his room. It'd be like I didn't care.'

'Who's to know?'

'The solicitors, when they come round to check the contents and before they transfer the deeds over.'

'Who to?'

'His next of kin. Me.'

'Of course. Sorry, I'm still bowled over with shock.'

'My poor boy, this is how it is. Life can be so bloody cruel, can't it?'

'Yes, bloody cruel.'

'He was only forty-nine. It just isn't fair.'

‘No, it isn’t fair. You’re right. So anyway, I’ll bring the keys tonight, if that’s all right.’

‘No.’

‘I’ve got to get a move on and – ’

‘Stop over now, Herman – ’

‘I can’t Aunty, I have to go to work. I’m already late, so I’ll see you tonight. Bye!’

Herman put the phone down and nipped a strident protest in the bud. He poured himself a mug of coffee and went upstairs.

Shandra was fast asleep. He slammed the door.

She stirred fitfully and woke up.

‘Don’t you have to go and see your new landlord?’ he asked.

‘I told you, one o’clock.’ She scissored her legs at the knees and pushed herself up into a sitting position. Her thin face was puffed up and blotchy. Like sleep was bad for her. ‘Don’t forget to give my new address to Sonny, if he comes back.’

‘To be honest, there’s no point.’

‘It’s only in Heath Town. Half an hour away, at the speed he drives.’

‘But he won’t be going to Heath Town again.’

‘That’s stupid. He’s got to go through Heath Town to get to the hospital.’

‘But he isn’t going to hospital. He’s not allowed in anymore.’

‘They have to let him in, if it’s his heart and his lungs.’

‘It’d be a waste of time. If they found him there, the doctors would only complain to the police.’

‘Well, he did flatten one once – a doctor. He told me. Dropped him like a sack of potatoes, he said.’

‘Oh, they wouldn’t worry about that. His capacity for violence has dropped to zero. They’d be more worried about him wasting space. He’d be in everyone’s way. Just like he was on the road, driving his taxi without regard to anyone else, the ill-mannered scumbag.’

She didn’t seem to notice how the vehemence grew in his voice. ‘But they have to look at him, don’t they? The doctors?’

‘What? Oh, they’d give him a quick glance, nothing more. He’s not a genuine emergency, you see.’

‘It ain’t right, he’s paid his taxes, they should look at him properly.’

Herman wasn’t going to argue about whether Sunny had paid his taxes. ‘You’ve got me there, Shandra. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to tell you this, but you’ve forced it out of me. Sonny’s dead.’

‘What!’ This screech actually hurt Herman’s ears.

‘I almost spilled my coffee then,’ he remonstrated.

‘What you doing, guy, giving me a shock like that?’

‘I didn’t want to tell you.’

‘You just did.’

‘Well, you winkled it out of me. And anyway, after last night, I thought I should be honest with you.’

‘You should have told me yesterday,’ she said, trying to drag out the drama.

‘I couldn’t.’

Shandra’s tone softened. ‘Too difficult, was it?’

‘No. You see, he died in the early hours of this morning. You didn’t hear the phone, did you? Aunt Cleopatra called me as soon as they told her.’

‘I didn’t hear no phone, no. I just heard you snoring.’

‘I snore, do I?’

‘I jabbed at you a couple of times, but you were out cold.’

‘Maybe you dreamed it.’ Herman said, rubbing his chin. Shandra was about to argue, and he knew that meant her talking at the top of her voice. He interjected: ‘And you talk in your sleep too. Did you know that?’

‘No one’s ever said.’

‘But they wouldn’t, would they? They’d have buggered off and gone to sleep in their own house.’

‘Hey!’ Shandra’s puffed up eyes grew comparatively wide.

‘Well, it’s true.’

But Sandra was frantically waving at him. ‘No, no, I mean Hey – I’ve just realised something, guy.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘You own this house now! He’s left it you, ain’t he?’

He gave her a dirty look. ‘Sure he has.’

Shandra did not notice the look. ‘Now you could rent some of these rooms out and make money!’

‘I could,’ Herman said sourly. ‘But I shan’t. I don’t like people around me at home, so I wouldn’t want lodgers, even if they were really quiet when they worked.’

Shandra’s shoulders sank in disappointment – to where they usually were. Her expression took on a faraway look. ‘Dead,’ she reflected. This condition had suddenly assumed greater importance than Sonny’s other traits, like mad, and dangerous.

She sighed and a world of pathos was contained within the sound. Shandra was not ungifted in her chosen profession. She could rouse her clients under some remarkably trying circumstances, but as for rousing Sonny now. Well, who was that good?

Shandra’s poignant sigh touched Herman. Truth be told, he felt poignant himself. Already his anger was subsiding and he was slipping back into his customary state of inner nothingness – that modern, gimcrack version of serenity and contentment.

‘Don’t you ever stop and wonder, Shandra, where it’s all heading? The world, I mean?’

‘Yes, ever since they blew my flat up.’

He smiled crookedly. ‘But otherwise life is wonderful?’

‘Well I ain’t got no rich uncle giving me his house in his will, have I? I’ve got to work for every penny that me and Royston gets.’

‘And what am I supposed to do about that?’ He sneered.

Shandra flared, a faint pink showing through her dull, dry skin. ‘You ain’t go to do anything, guy. Heath Town is just a stepping stone, you know. Royston will be getting this place in London next year and I’m going with him.’

‘Royston. He’s your boyfriend, is he?’

‘Yeah.’

He had come within a whisker of using the proper term.

‘London will be expensive,’ he remarked, subsiding into indifference again.

‘But there’s more money down there.’

‘Cancels out though, doesn’t it? Why not stay around here and get a regular job?’

‘Fuck off.’

Herman laughed. ‘Okay. I’ll put some toast on for you, and some coffee. Get up.’

Shandra seemed to regret her rudeness. ‘I hated school,’ she explained. ‘And you need certificates for a regular job.’

Herman put his coffee on the sideboard and pulled the curtains apart to let the sickly sunlight stream in.

‘I never liked school much myself,’ he said. ‘But that was because I really wanted an education and all the teachers were shit. Still, I kept at it. I knew I had to keep at it, whatever happened. I had plenty of anti role models in my family to show me what happened if I didn’t try. Uncle was one.’

‘But he did really well, didn’t he, without any qualifications?’

‘True.’

‘Not being educated doesn’t mean you can’t have any ambitions.’

He retrieved his mug of coffee. ‘No?’

‘Me and Royston have got ambitions. We’re trying and one day we’ll make it. We’ve already come close with the eggs.’

Herman was brought to a stop on his the way out of the room.

‘Eh?’

‘Royston gave me this number he said he got out the paper. He said we could make a load of cash for free. And I’d be over the op in days. I was amazed when he told me. I’ve never seen him reading a paper in his life.’

‘No kidding – he read a newspaper and got a number out of it. What number?’

‘For women’s eggs. They’re buying women’s eggs in America.’

‘Women’s eggs? What the –’

‘For people who can’t have kids, see?’

‘In America?’

‘For people who can’t have kids in America.’

‘How much?’

‘Twenty-thousand dollars.’

Herman leaned against the door jamb and shook his head. ‘How about that.’ It took a moment to remember that he didn’t have any eggs to sell. ‘Typical.’

Shandra gushed on. ‘Royston was jumping around the room, yelling and punching the air. It was so funny.’ Her voice grew tender. ‘I never saw him so happy. Like a schoolboy almost. Then he told me to call America straightaway.’

‘It’s a lot of money.’

‘That’s what I said, but he said I had to speculate to accumulate.’

‘No, I didn’t mean the phone call, I mean twenty-thousand dollars is a lot of money.’

‘And Royston was already spending it – in his mind. He really wants a Mercedes, and he kept shouting it – Merc, Merc, Merc! I had to tell him to shut up. See, he’s already got one.’

‘A Mercedes?’

‘Yeah, but to be fair, it’s shit –’

‘Oh? Has he got a garage to put it in?’

‘Uh? Garage? No!’

‘It must be shit then if it’s a Mercedes and he parks it out and no one nicks it.’

‘Oh, that’s more down to his reputation than anything.’

‘Ah, that’s shit too, of course.’ Herman nodded sagely. Shandra was about to object to him calling Royston’s reputation shit, but he went on. ‘A new Merc, or any kind of decent car, needs a garage. It wouldn’t make sense to get a new car without a garage to put it in.’

Shandra looked all too likely to admit that Royston did not make sense, but at the last gasp his intellectual reputation was saved when she pointed out that – ‘There’s a garage that comes with the flat in Heath Town.’

Herman pulled a face. ‘So, he’ll be getting a new Mercedes, then?’

‘Not yet. I phoned the number in America, like he told me to, and I got through to

this snotty woman and I said to her I want to sell her my eggs and she said there was a form or something I had to fill out first and then they would consider my application, but she warned me that standards were high and I'd need a college education as a minimum. Then I got angry and I said, *well, what does an education have to do with eggs?* And I could hear then that this fucking bitch was just laughing. I told her she must be kidding and she suddenly got serious and said this wasn't a joke because it's what the parents ask for and even if I had a degree it'd go against me if I had smoked crack cocaine, even just once. But then I asked why would I be selling my eggs if coke wasn't so expensive? Well, that shut her up. But the thing is, Royston was still jumping around and yapping, *tell her you got loads and loads of eggs*. His eyes were popping out of his head. See, he knew what he was talking about because he watched this programme on telly and they showed these big turtles on the beach laying eggs and there were tons of them coming out, but then, turtles do it all at once, don't they? With us women it's one at a time. He'd worked it out, you see. From the turtles. He's pretty smart really, like Sonny, only I wished he'd shut the fuck up, because I was trying to talk to this snotty woman. I never thought Americans were supposed to be snotty. Anyway, she was and Royston only made her even more snotty, but you can't tell him, not unless you want a fist in the mush. But still, he gave me an idea and so I told the woman I've got loads of eggs, and I'd let the lot go, like turtles, for ten thousand. And the fucking woman says how about five thousand instead? I was so insulted, but still, five thousand dollars would make all the difference, and Royston was nodding like a maniac and hissing down my neck, *take it, take it*, so I say okay and the woman says she'd send the form through. And then she asks whether the man in my life was with me, and I say yes and she says there were doctors at the institute who might be interested in obtaining samples of what he had, you know, vital fluids – for experimental purposes. They would drop three or four different kinds of acid on it, she said, and eventually that might make a breakthrough and solve the problem. Anyway, she promised to send him a form as well, but no forms ever came.'

After a pause, Herman said, 'Try selling a kidney instead. Your education wouldn't be an issue with anyone having your kidney.'

'No way. What's the point? I've only got two of them. Anyway, after we've moved to Heath Town, I'm going to find a different egg company, in Australia this time, and tell them I've got an education. They pay more too.'

'Don't tell them about the crack.'

'What do you think I am, stupid? I learned my lesson from that bitch. But she'll laugh on the other side of her mouth when I sell my eggs to Australia.'

Herman went downstairs and put bread under the grill to toast. He yelled upstairs when it was ready and told Shandra to come down.

'Don't you want to eat it in bed?' She shouted from the bedroom.

'No!'

She came down and ate with gusto. 'You know,' she mused, settling back in her chair. 'All your uncle was ever interested in was anal.'

Herman cleared his throat. 'Ah – I see.'

'Anal, anal, anal! That was him to a tee.' She spoke with uncharacteristic disgust. 'But of course, any time you want to try it yourself –'

'To be honest, I have a busy day ahead.'

'Me too!' Shandra said and swigged on her coffee. 'Royston will be wondering where I am. It's going to be really hard work to convince him I haven't earned anything – just bed and breakfast.'

'Never mind, there's always tomorrow. And after Rentokil's been round, you'll

have a new flat.'

'So long as Royston hasn't spent any of the deposit. I know what he'll say if he has, that I should have made some money last night.'

As usual, Herman became distant whenever Shandra talked about cash. She should get it through her head that he did not believe in charity, just as he did not believe in anal, anal, anal!

Oh, it was a hard world. Still, Herman assuaged his conscience by reminding himself that where Uncle Sonny had forged a path, others would be sure to follow. Yes, she had a busy day ahead, all right.

By then Herman really was late for work. He hurried Shandra towards the door. Casting back a bashful eye she said, 'Maybe I should call again?'

'Who knows, maybe. By the way, if Royston ever comes round here I'll call the police. Okay?'

'Okay!'

Chapter Five

Herman left the house a few minutes later. There happened to be a bus stop across the road and when a bus came along he climbed aboard and sat on the top deck.

The raspy engine vibrated through the metalwork and stirred a deep ache in the small of Herman's back. The bus was almost full. From somewhere behind him, he could hear the monotonous burble of a lunatic talking to himself. 'Why won't you tell Nicky about the dog?' was the recurring question that no one was going to answer on the bus, or anywhere else.

Frowning, Herman gazed through the cloudy windows at the suburban streets unrolling themselves out towards the city centre. The dreary houses gave way to mini markets and burger joints and sprawling car parks.

The further he left Sonny's house behind, the more amazed and disgusted he was by his behaviour towards Shandra. It was as if Sonny had left his spirit behind in the place and it had possessed him, a bit like the Tommyknockers, in that book he'd read once, written by Stephen King. Or maybe it was something in the blood, something atavistic in himself – original sin, or Adam's curse, or the sins of the fathers, like in that book he'd never read, written by God.

He closed his eyes and told himself that he didn't want his wretched uncle's house. When he opened them again, the bus had already reached the ring road. A concrete bridge took it over the dizzying river of cars and then it descended into the narrow streets of the city centre. The narrow sidewalks swarmed with the early shoppers – the innumerable plankton of society.

From the top deck of the bus, Herman could look straight into the offices that occupied the floors above the shops and see the buttoned-up solicitors, accountants and IT workers hard at work. Didn't they, like the shopkeepers, subsist off the human plankton below? And come to think of it, didn't everyone? Didn't the corporations and bankers ultimately derive all their power and wealth from the bottom of the food chain? The state also?

Just like whales in the sea, all these monsters fed off the smallest creatures. Even the lowliest scum of all, even the Roystons and Shandras, provided some sustenance by virtue of the sheer bulk of their numbers. And not only did the lowly scum buy stuff to keep the corporations in pocket, they supplied moral support too. Shandra would give the doctors something to feel good about by requiring regular medical treatment, and Royston likewise would give a barrister or two a reason to get out of bed, till the joyous day came when he expired in prison.

Herman broke off from his meandering reflections in order to lean forward in his seat and cautiously massage the small of his back. The jarring shudder of the ropey bus engine had kicked up a horrible ache down there. He had been troubled by the same recurring ache for some weeks now. It seemed to be getting worse.

He got off the bus a stop early and walked to the nuclear bunker they called City Hall.

When he arrived in the office, he found Fennimore's hard little eyes were fixed on his empty desk so that Herman had no choice but to bring himself to Fennimore's

attention when he sat down.

He acted like he hadn't noticed until a shadow fell across his desk and spoke with a hectoring and nasal voice. 'Herman.'

Feigning surprise, Herman looked up from his very urgent business and stared at Fennimore inquiringly. 'Yes?'

'Why are you late?'

'I'm not well. I've booked an appointment with the doctor for this evening.'

'It's nothing catching, is it?'

'No, I'd say not'

Fennimore's gazed inquiringly at him, creating a frigid silence that Herman was expected to fill by blabbing about his symptoms in a pitiful attempt to justify his temerity in being ill.

Herman gave his computer screen a puzzled glance, as if he couldn't understand why he, Fennimore, was preventing him from doing his job.

'You don't seem too bad,' Fennimore observed.

'I've had to take some exceptionally strong painkillers.'

'They don't make you drowsy, do they?'

'They're full of caffeine. They actually perk you up.'

'That's good. Except, you can't tell with these drugs. You might suddenly come down and feel even worse.'

'Might do, yes.'

'Well, if you do, don't suffer too much. Push off if you can't do your job properly anymore.'

'Thanks. I will.'

Fennimore glared at Herman before he drifted away. His usual state of subdued hostility seemed to have flowered into something more. Perhaps he was motivated enough now to double check this story about being unwell.

As a precaution, Herman phoned his doctor's surgery and made an appointment for that evening.

While he spoke to the medical secretary, he noted that his symptoms actually worsened a little. The ache in his back was making him feel quite sick now. Still, he wouldn't go home, even though Fennimore had given that option his blessing, because there was nothing at home apart from the television and the noise of four lanes of traffic. Here, at the office in City Hall, there was at least the semblance of human contact. More than the semblance in the case of his girlfriend, Caitlin, who worked in accounts, two floors above.

Caitlin had almond eyes, long legs and a cascade of coppery curls, but just lately she wouldn't shut up about Alex, the dashing young trainee accountant. That's why they'd quarrelled and weren't talking at the moment.

Putting up with the discomfort, Herman concentrated on his work, making better than usual progress. And while he did so, the sun sailed across the smoggy city skies and another day passed into eternal oblivion.

Suddenly, it was time to go home.

He was walking down the wide steps that led from the office to the glass portals of City Hall when it occurred to him that a drink would be nice before he went to see the doctor. He called Caitlin on her mobile.

'Hello you,' she chirped.

Herman's spirits lifted. It sounded like she had forgiven him, and in record time too.

'A drink? Oh no, sweetheart. I've got a hairdressing appointment. They could

only fit me in after six, sorry.'

She sounded sorry too.

'Never mind, it's no big deal,' Herman said, wishing he really meant it. Trouble was, he knew full well that she was grooming herself at the hairdressers for the benefit of her dashing young accountant. 'Maybe in the next life, eh?'

'Maybe.'

So he trailed out of the huge shadowy concourse of City Hall and joined the swarming minions scurrying home under grey, red-streaked skies.

He couldn't face Cleopatra asking about his girlfriend again, so he when arrived at his Aunty's apartment, he bent down and pushed Sonny's keys through the letter flap.

The door whooshed open and Uncle Oliver beamed down at him, looking ten years younger.

'Herman! I thought you were one of those kids, tampering with the lock again. We've been having the devil of trouble off them.'

Herman stood up right, wincing at the stabbing pain in his back. 'Just dropping the keys off.'

'What's the matter, lad?'

'Nothing.'

'Come in, then.'

'I can't, I'm going to the doctor's.'

His uncle's thin face, gouged by years of suffering, lit up. 'It's your kidneys, son. I can tell just by looking at you.'

'It's my back.'

'That's what you think, but I can see it in your eyes. Or rather the deep dark hollows under your eyes and the white speckles. It's your kidneys. Don't let the doctor try and tell you it's just your back. Get a second opinion. Christ almighty, I wish I had.'

'Where's Aunty Cleo?'

'In bed with a headache. She's been crying all day.'

'I was upset too, when she told me Uncle had died.'

'Oh, you shouldn't dwell on these things at your age. Enjoy yourself while you can. I bet you'll be off flying your kite tonight, eh? And then you'll be sowing your oats?'

'After I've been to the doctors, perhaps. So, you'll have Uncle's house to live in now. Aunty Cleo's the closest relative Sonny had, isn't she?'

'Yes, she is,' Oliver said, glowing with new found health. He seemed to be filling out and growing more radiant by the second. 'But we'll have to see. Sonny may have left everything to his cat.'

'Did he have a cat?'

'No, but you know what I mean.' Oliver gave Herman's shoulder a friendly little punch and Herman swayed like a broken reed. 'Remember what I tell you, don't let that doctor fob you off with some story that you're not sick. You are sick. *Really* sick. They'll do anything to get out of operating on you. I can't blame them though. What's the point in saving the scum bags round here? They only breed and draw money off the state. And their kids are the same rubbish as their parents. They never stop interfering with the lock, trying to get in and steal the rugs from under our feet. I'll tell you what the real prescription is, boy – move out of this God-awful city. It'll do you the world of good.'

Chapter Six

Doctor Brown, had a simian face with square teeth that were all the same size and eyebrows that joined over the top of his nose. He grinned while Herman described his symptoms. Having listened, Brown spent some time prodding the small of Herman's back. After that, he stopped grinning.

Herman had never seen Brown not grinning.

'I think we'll book you in for a scan. And I'll just take a blood sample while you're here.'

Herman was crushed.

'What's wrong?'

'Oh, nothing to worry about,' Dr Brown said, frowning at a hypodermic needle he held up for inspection. 'Just the usual tests, that's all. We only need a drop of blood.'

He pushed the needle into Herman's arm and then went on to extract what looked like an awful lot of blood. The hypodermic now looked like a big stick of crimson candy.

'What tests?' Herman's voice was small.

'Oh . . . standard tests.'

All at once, Herman found himself in the clammy embrace of naked, gibbering fear.

The words squeaked in his throat. 'Is it cancer?'

Dr Brown guffawed.

'You wouldn't believe the number of times I hear that question. And you know, the problem is *never* cancer. Well, almost never. Don't worry about anything. Do you hear? *I* wouldn't, if I were you. So anyway, I think we'll arrange for you to have a scan for the end of the week.'

'That's fast.'

'There's no urgency.'

'Perhaps the week after, I am busy on Friday.'

'No problem.'

'No?'

Dr Brown rubbed his chin. 'Best get it done Friday, eh?'

Herman swallowed hard. 'Okay.'

'I say that,' Dr Brown said, 'simply because we like to meet our efficiency targets. It's a management thing. Like I say, there's no urgency. All right?' Brown gave Herman his best simian grin.

'All right.'

'Good.'

Herman had scarcely got home when the phone rang. It was the doctor's secretary. 'Good news, Mr Sylvester, we've got you in for the scan tomorrow morning! Wednesday. Nine o'clock, bright and early.'

'Great.' Herman said, his voice fluting. 'But I thought it was going to be Friday.'

'Oh, we don't mess around when it could be . . . anything else we can do for you?'

'No. Thank you.'

He was restless that night. Never had the four lanes of traffic outside his window thrummed more fatalistically. As he rose from his bed next morning, he felt both exhausted and horribly wide awake.

The journey to the local hospital seemed to take forever. As he waited outside the oncology department the ache in the small of his back spread out as the cancer grew at an astonishing rate. He could see the thing in his mind, a swelling, pulsating tumour with a big grin on its amorphous face.

Almost as an afterthought, he pulled out his phone and called the office to explain that he would be late that morning.

He was put through to Fennimore.

‘Just calling to say I’m at New Cross Hospital.’

‘You’re at the hospital?’ Fennimore’s tone was accusatory.

‘I’ll be back in the office by eleven.’

‘Why are you at the hospital?’

‘For tests’

‘For tests? Is that all?’

‘That’s all.’

‘What I mean is, if it’s not an emergency, why wasn’t there time to notify me you’d be in hospital rather than here?’

‘I was fast tracked. They were supposed to see me later in the week.’

‘They fast tracked your tests?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hmm . . . I see. Very well. Thanks for calling. You said eleven?’

‘Yes, eleven.’

‘But if they decide to keep you in, you’ll call, won’t you?’

Herman’s stomach turned over. It was as if Fennimore knew something he didn’t. ‘They won’t keep me in.’

Fennimore was not impressed by this heroic determination. ‘You don’t think so?’

‘No.’

‘I see.’ There was a grim pause. ‘Still, if they’ve fast tracked you, it must be serious, wouldn’t you say?’

Unnerved by the hospital ambience, Herman’s bravado ran out and he stuttered, ‘I –’

‘Anyway, good luck!’

The line went dead.

The tests were delayed by two hours and he had to take a taxi in order to be at the office by half eleven. He didn’t want to delay proving to Fennimore that he was still alive.

However, Fennimore was in a meeting and did not learn that Herman had survived his visit to hospital until later that day.

Chapter Seven

City Hall had acquired the warm, soft glow of nostalgia.

Over the four days of misery that Herman had to endure while he waited to learn from Dr Brown how long he had left on earth, he found himself viewing his colleagues with an unbearably poignancy. Yes, they were protozoa and microbes in the great social order, but, unlike him, they were blessed with a future.

How Herman longed to be as lucky as Hardiman, who handled social benefit claims in an almost comically surly manner and who loved *Arsenal Soccer Club* more than anything else in the world. What a wonderful world it would be if he were Hardiman instead of someone who was going to die soon!

Or he could be Ahmed or Richie.

They worked in the IT Department and Herman had previously thought of them as little more than self-propelling slime. And yet . . . and yet . . . did they not rule as gods in their own digital pornographic universes?

O happy, happy souls!

Even Fennimore, with his rat's skull and semi-transparent skin and ginger hair and concave chest and protuberant stomach – Herman even envied Fennimore. That's just how sick he was . . .

'No, you're not sick at all Herman.'

'Really?'

'Well, I know we were a little worried about cancer, but it's nothing worse than gallstones.' Doctor Brown was grinning again. 'That's a relief to hear, isn't it?'

Herman batted back tears of joy. 'Thank you.'

'Anyway, you'll see a consultant next week and he'll probably say they should come out. A routine operation.'

'Great!'

'Don't worry about the operation, they use keyhole surgery these days.'

'I'd jump on the operating table right now.'

'That's what I like to hear!'

And a stay in hospital would mean he would get a break from those grubby little invertebrates he had to work with.

Chapter Eight

Next day Herman explained to Fennimore that he would be off sick for a couple of weeks.

‘Gallstones?’ Fennimore hooted in derision. As it transpired, he had a very low opinion of gallstones. They inspired him with nothing but contempt. ‘Alex Ledwery in the Planning Office, do you know him?’

‘What? No, I don’t.’

‘How convenient. So you never heard that he had gallstones removed last year, did you?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘After the operation, he was up and around in four hours. Back at work next day.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Gallstones scarcely inconvenienced him for more than an afternoon. They held him back four hours, not two weeks. What do you say about that than?’

‘I wish I could afford his doctor.’

Fennimore leaned back in his chair and contemplated him, his lip curled up in distaste. A global economic depression and the shortage of jobs had unleashed the tyrannical instinct in middle management.

‘You’re not going to turn this into an issue about pay, are you?’ He sneered.

‘Perish the thought, sir.’

‘No? Still, two weeks. You’re going to punch one hell of a hole in my grid.’

Herman made a meaningless gesture with one hand. ‘I wish there were some other way.’

Fennimore’s little eyes followed Herman’s moving hand. ‘You’re too young to have gallstones. What caused them?’

‘It’s a medical mystery.’

‘But are you absolutely sure they have to be removed?’

‘Doctor’s orders.’

‘Are you getting a second opinion?’

‘No,’ Herman said uncertainly. ‘Why should I?’

‘Because if you don’t know what caused these gallstones then won’t they just come back again? And next time they may be ten times larger. Perhaps you should keep these smaller ones. Learn to live with the devil you know.’

‘Maybe.’

‘And if you’re going to be off for two weeks, rather than four hours, your condition may be basically inoperable. Have you thought of that?’

Herman frowned and shook his head. ‘I don’t follow.’

‘Because,’ Fennimore explained with infinite patience, ‘if they want you to be available for two weeks perhaps they want to be ready to perform a second urgent operation, or maybe a third. And each one will be twice as dangerous as the one before.’

Herman relaxed. He sensed that Fennimore was grasping at straws. Hadn’t the doctors already eliminated cancer? Fennimore didn’t know what he was talking about.

He was too busy being irate. Herman was glad Fennimore was irate. That fact gave him warm glow of satisfaction and he noted that this was the first warm glow of satisfaction he had ever experienced at work.

He smiled blandly.

‘I suppose that’s possible, Mr Fennimore. I’ll ask the consultant how many operations I may actually need.’

‘Be sure to phone and let me know straightaway if the news is bad.’

‘I promise, sir.’

Immediately after this conversation, Herman made the mistake of believing he and Fennimore had reached a new understanding. Yes, they loathed each other, but Herman had earned the right to be as sick as he wanted, when he wanted and how he wanted. However, several days later, Fennimore appeared at Herman’s desk once more and deposited a batch of papers in front of him.

‘These need to be processed by Thursday, Herman,’ he said. ‘Steve’s off ill.’

‘Sorry, but I can’t fit these in.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I’m not going to be here.’

Fennimore stared. ‘Why not?’

‘I’m going to be in the hospital. My operation.’

‘What? You’re still going through with it?’ Fennimore yipped.

‘Yes.’ Herman was incredulous. ‘Of course I am.’

‘But you’ve got better, haven’t you?’

‘No, I’ve got worse.’

‘Didn’t you ask your consultant whether an operation was really necessary?’

‘He confirmed that it was.’

‘Did he? But I asked you to tell me if the news was bad.’

‘But it’s not bad news, it’s good. He told me I’d only need one operation and that operation will be very straightforward.’

‘And you’ll be back next day?’

‘No, two weeks.’

Fennimore was extremely pained by this. ‘But that is *bad* news, Herman. You’ll be out of the loop two whole weeks. Why can’t you be like Alex Ledwery? Back at work the next day?’

‘I mentioned him to the consultant and he said Alex Ledwery needed his head examined.’

‘Are you sure he was a real doctor?’

Herman couldn’t stop himself now, he favoured Fennimore with a smile of contempt. ‘No, but I could double check that he wasn’t just pretending.’

Fennimore glowered at him with hate. But he couldn’t stop himself either.

‘Because I was thinking, only the other day,’ he went on in a quieter, more menacing tone, ‘that you look fitter than anyone else round here, including me.’

‘Perhaps that’s because I’ve been taking those extra strong pain killers I mentioned before. I’m on six a day.’

‘And they’re working, are they?’

‘Yes, they’re really the business.’

Fennimore vibrated with exasperation. ‘Then why bother with the operation? If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’

‘The pain killers will only give me an ulcer.’

There was a pause. ‘And that would mean another operation, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes, and a lot more time off work than I’d need to recover from a gallstone

operation.’

When Fennimore could speak again, recrimination was the order of the day. ‘So, now I have to load Ahmed down with this lot.’ He indicated the files he had piled up on Herman’s desk. ‘What do you say to that?’

‘It’s team spirit, isn’t it? If I were in his shoes I’d smile and accept it.’

Without another word, but with his eyes bulging under the pressure of repressed anger, Fennimore gathered up the bundle of paperwork and left in search of Ahmed.

Herman couldn’t believe how empowering his gall stones were. This was the second time he’d sent Fennimore packing like a whipped cur.

The warm, cosy sensation of enhanced self esteem lasted only till he went for lunch in the staff canteen and he spotted Caitlin eating alone at one of the tables.

His heart sank as he recalled that, so far as he knew, Caitlin was no longer his girlfriend.

He collected his lunch – meat pie and potato chips – and wandered over to her without enthusiasm.

Caitlin smiled at him as he sat opposite. ‘Hello you,’ she said. ‘How’s it going?’

He was surprised by her affectionate manner, unmixed by any antagonism. That was how it had been when they were first getting to know each other.

He half-smiled back. ‘Not bad at all. How are you?’

‘Great.’

‘Have you heard about that film?’ He asked, swept along by sudden optimism.

‘What film?’

‘The Duel of Evil.’

She pulled a face.

He added quickly, ‘No, it’s not about evil, as such. It’s a kind of comedy.’

‘Yeah?’

‘A good one. By that director, you know, what’s his name – damn. Thingy – the guy who directed that film . . . er, what’s it called?’

‘What is it about?’

‘About two neighbours and they’re both called Jones. You know that saying, keeping up with the Joneses?’

‘Of course.’

‘So they’re always trying to keep up to each other and it gets, you know, to a ridiculous level. Especially as one family is connected to the Mafia, and –’

‘Aren’t you eating anything?’

‘Um?’ Herman found that he had been toying with his food. ‘I’m not that hungry.’

‘That’s not like you.’ A little frown of concern fractured her porcelain brow.

Herman very nearly told her about the operation. But playing the sympathy card really wasn’t on in the modern era.

‘I’m trimming down.’

Any reference to dieting was bound to galvanize Caitlin and she began to give him a long list of tips and insights from her own battles with excess weight.

Herman had never told her that in his opinion she was too thin. He listened with feigned interest, wondering meanwhile at how much they sounded like a couple of old girlfriends chatting away.

At some point the realisation landed like a sickening punch. Yes, a couple of friends was all they were now. She and the accountant – that cut-price alpha male – must have become lovers. That’s why she was being so affable towards him. Sweet almost. It could only mean that the accountant was suffering her endless dissatisfaction instead of him.

Herman did not betray any sign that the last colour had just drained out of his life. He watched with a forced smile while Caitlin broadcast dieting tips while stuffing on her food like a horse. Like a hungry horse. Like a hungry horse in a hurry. Maybe she had to get back to the accountant so he could check out her figures.

Before she did go though, and after she'd washed her last mouthful down with a gulp of Coke, Caitlin asked him again, 'Are you sure you're all right, dear?'

Obviously she thought it wasn't a redundant question.

'Yes, I'm fine.'

Caitlin's gaze lingered for a moment in order to appraise him with a curious dispassion. Then she said, 'Better go now, lover. See you again?'

There was nothing rhetorical about the question. She seemed to believe she might never see him again.

'Yeah, sure. I'll still be working here next year.'

'Of course you will.'

He smiled. 'Okay, don't rub it in.'

Her eyes grew damp. 'You're very brave.'

She stood up and turned from him before he could get over his surprise and he was left wondering whether she'd heard about his run ins with Fennimore. No doubt about it, her accountant wouldn't have the guts to stick up to Fennimore like he did.

'Missing me already, eh?' He told himself.

Chapter Nine

The hospital was a huge, sprawling complex of buildings on the outskirts of the city.

Herman travelled there by the dedicated bus service. His car was in the garage and it was curious to think, wasn't it, that if he died on the operating table, the car would have survived him in better shape than ever before.

The journey, as he knew it would, brought back memories of going to see his father, who had subsequently left hospital to go to Heaven and join God. His mother, meanwhile, had left to go to Southend-on-Sea and join a Polish plumber.

Herman didn't bother calling her to mention he was in hospital, otherwise he would only have to listen to her justify herself for not coming to visit him.

He hadn't told Aunt Cleopatra and Uncle Oliver either. For them, inheriting Sonny's house was the nearest they would come to winning the national lottery. Invigorated by their luck they were bound to be away on holiday.

The rough engine of the bus sawed the early morning air, still chilly despite the sun that hovered in the reddish sky. His eyes registered, unwillingly, the battered middle-aged faces of his fellow passengers. They were off to stultifying jobs in warehouses, shops and offices. He had tended to avoid this side of the city since his father had died. There was nothing here anyway, apart from the hospital. With the same old weary revulsion, Herman ticked off the antediluvian landmarks. The grey and purple apartment blocks joined up by concrete bridges, the overcrowded cemetery next to a derelict factory, the litter-strewn garage forecourt where cars as glossy as capsules and pills waited in rows for the rest of eternity.

The bus lumbered off the main road into the hospital complex. Herman had a letter from the ward clerk with instructions and, following these, he got off at the second stop and entered the urology block.

He gave himself up at the reception desk and waited for a short time on a plastic seat. A hollow feeling formed at the pit of his stomach at the sight of an emaciated patient, the colour of fried liver, inching across his field of vision, supporting himself with a dented and scuffed metal walking frame. And then a nurse approached – a small, angular woman who frowned at him before she smiled. From then on, Herman was taken up and swept along by the hospital system. A series of increasingly impersonal experts came to see him in bed, and when he closed his eyes, he saw their large heads expand and float up to dance around the icy moon.

He heard laughter and opened his eyes to find himself lying on a Gurney outside the operating theatre. The nurses were chatting to each other, ignoring him. The anaesthetist returned to ascertain that he had fully returned to consciousness and Herman realised that the operation was already over.

The nurses wheeled him back to the ward and helped him into bed. Later the catering assistant came and handed him a card with the menu on it. He was hungry and although he was warned that he might feel nauseous he nevertheless ordered a full dinner, which he ate with gusto. Then a nurse came and gave him an analgesic and he slept till the following morning. Soon after he awoke, the consultant paid him a brief visit and declared that he was fit to be discharged from his care.

Herman got up, dressed behind screens and found his own way back to the reception concourse, from where he phoned for a taxi.

Back home, he found a letter waiting for him from Alcestor Jones, Funeral Directors since 1967, inviting him to Uncle Sonny's funeral, set for the last Friday of the month.

If it had been earlier, he'd have gone. It would have been a break from sitting at home listening to the traffic. But frankly, he'd rather be at work than send Uncle Sonny off to hell.

So he murmured to himself, 'Fuck that.'

Chapter Ten

While Herman had been off work convalescing, Fennimore had gone on a skiing holiday. They both returned on the same Monday morning.

Glowing with health, Fennimore called Herman over to his desk for a little chat.

‘So, how are you?’ Fennimore trilled. ‘Did you enjoy your fortnight holiday?’

Keenly aware of the dark rings under his bloodshot eyes and that the skin of his face was grey and slack, Herman said, ‘Feeling miles better, thank you. That two weeks was just what the doctor ordered. Literally.’

‘I can see he knows what he’s doing,’ Fennimore smiled. ‘You’re looking tip top. By the bye, I was chatting with Alex Lewdry the other day. He was very interested to hear that you’ve had gallstones removed. He said that after his operation he felt like nothing could hold him back. How about you, Herman? Do you feel like nothing could hold you back?’

‘Yeah, I’m full of beans all right.’

‘I thought so. As soon as I laid eyes on you this morning, I thought – *the boy’s bursting for a fresh challenge*. And as it so happens, a new opening has cropped up in another department.’

Herman fell for it. ‘Is there an opening in marketing?’

‘Not as *such*.’ Fennimore said. ‘More in night auditing.’

Wising up in two seconds flat, Herman frowned thoughtfully and then shook his head. ‘No, I don’t recall expressing an interest in night auditing, not like I have in marketing. I’ve mentioned my interest in marketing quite a few times, haven’t I?’

Fennimore’s eyes shone. ‘Yes, you have. But there aren’t any openings in the marketing department at the moment.’

‘Then I think I should stay where I am.’

‘Ah, but perhaps not. Now, you may *think* that night auditing is not a move towards marketing, but it is.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, because if you move from housing benefits to night auditing, you’ve proved that you are flexible enough to move from night auditing to marketing.’

‘The thing about night auditing,’ Herman said, glancing around idly as he spoke, ‘is that it’s at night. Night not a good time for me, because in September I’ll be starting the next term of my marketing diploma, which is an evening course.’

‘But what about if a job in *night marketing* came up, what would you say then?’

‘I’d still prefer to be awake in the day, so I’d have to say, *no thanks* to that one too.’

‘Have you ever worked nights?’

‘No.’

‘Then how would you know it isn’t really your thing? You might blossom by night.’

‘My uncle worked nights and he never seemed a well man. He was in and out of hospital like anything.’

‘But you’re in and out of hospital anyway.’

‘If I work nights, I might never get out of hospital.’

‘You’re being unduly pessimistic. Lots of people work nights and they don’t go to hospital at all.’

‘That’s not what I’ve read.’

Fennimore looked pained. ‘Well they say all sorts of things on the back of crisp packets, but what Alex Lewdry says, and I agree with him, is it would be a good move for you, and anyway the fact is, it says in your contract that you should be available to work nights.’

‘I don’t think so.’

Fennimore began to flush with anger – the flush deepening the pink of his sunburn. ‘You think wrong, Herman.’

‘Really? I will have to look at my contract, but – ’

‘For two weeks in a year,’ Fennimore snapped.

Herman snapped back. ‘What?’

‘When required,’ Fennimore said, speaking slowly now, or rather, growling slowly, ‘you are obliged to cover night shifts for two weeks in a year.’

Herman realised then that he might have missed that particular clause. He almost agreed to put in the two weeks, simply to avoid a struggle he could not win. Then he checked himself. There was something fishy here, because incontestably a mere two weeks of suffering would *not* be enough to satisfy Fennimore’s malice.

No, what would actually happen was while he, Herman, did the two weeks stint, Fennimore would deftly fill his current post and leave him stranded in night auditing forevermore.

‘I’ll have to discuss this with Jeff,’ Herman said. Jeff was the departmental head.

‘Okay,’ Fennimore agreed without hesitation.

Herman suddenly felt hot. Fennimore was content to allow him to go over his head. That was a bad sign.

‘I’ll call him – ’ Herman began, sounding queasy.

‘Friday would be good,’ Fennimore said, just as if he hadn’t already arranged it. ‘You can make an appointment for Friday . . . I imagine.’

‘No, not Friday.’

‘No? Not Friday? Tell me why.’

‘I have to go to a funeral on Friday. My Uncle died four weeks ago, but he was in prison at the time so they had to do an autopsy, and after that there was a queue for the cemetery and that was probably the only queue he didn’t jump in his life. So, at long last, they’re burying him this Friday.’

Fennimore could not conceal his disgust. ‘Another day off? It’s just one holiday after another for you, isn’t it, Herman?’

Chapter Eleven

Sonny's funeral service was held in a brutal, redbrick church that stood on the outskirts of the city. The day was dark and dismal and in every way apt for a funeral. But in this particular instance that was only the weather being ironic.

Herman noted a couple of composite suits among the mourners – the trousers not quite matching the jackets. Indeed, on seeing a large number of his distant relatives gathered together in one place, Herman was struck by the general appearance of poverty and ill health.

He had to smile during the service when the vicar spoke in glowing terms about Sonny, as if he were a valued and much missed member of the community. It was a wild allegation that wouldn't have stood up in any court. But fair enough, the vicar had never actually met the deceased.

After the hymns they left the church. The burial was to be conducted in a cemetery several miles away. The mourners gathered in clumps in the church yard before gradually dispersing to their cars to follow the hearse.

Herman, who had been a little late arriving at the service, only caught sight of Aunty Cleopatra now, as she and Uncle Oliver left the church. Uncle Oliver had suffered a relapse, and he was lolling in a wheelchair. Cleopatra pushed it around aggressively.

Herman was about to go over and say hello when his path was blocked by a jumpy, narrow shouldered young man. It was Marseilles, Cleopatra's son. And who knows, Oliver's son too.

Marseilles had moved to London a couple of years before, where life had not been kind to him. He was still only in his twenties and yet his face was deeply lined and drained of colour, and his eyes, in contrast to his lithe, tense body, were weary and faded.

'Hey guy, I didn't recognise you! You've changed.' Marseilles bobbed around on the spot as he spoke.

Herman took a step back – it felt safer. 'Hello, Marseilles, how you doing, blood?'

'Good, good, good. Shepherd's Bush, coz – it's the place.'

'Is it?'

'Yeah. Want to come down someday?'

'Probably not.'

'Good, good, good, it'll be boss to see you.'

'So, you doing okay?'

'Yeah, this bullshit with the cops, it's nothing.'

'Never mind them, eh?'

'Nah. I don't. My room's solid, even if I have to spend a few weeks in the pokey. It'll be waiting for me, because,' he sniffed and for some reason looked up at the sky, 'I'm boshing the landlady's daughter, ain't I?'

'Nice.'

'Yeah. But how about you, guy? You're well fixed now, eh?'

'Yeah, it was a neat job. Very slick.'

‘How’s that?’

‘You know, you can’t even see the stitches.’

Marseilles became both silent and still. ‘Was it a stitch up job?’ He said, sort of fascinated.

‘Well, I wouldn’t say . . . Yeah, that’s one way of putting it.’

The whole of Marseilles face wrinkled up into a broad smile. ‘Hey, I’m not knocking it. Respect, guy. Fucking hell.’ He shook his head in admiration. ‘Respect.’

‘Thanks . . . what for?’

‘What?’

‘What are the congratulations for?’

Marseilles frowned. ‘The house, of course.’

‘What house?’

‘Sonny’s!’

Herman shrugged. He was too bored to try and work out what his cousin meant.

‘No need to act dumb,’ Marseilles reproved. ‘I ain’t going to tell Mom nothing. Why should she get it after cussing him every day for the last fifty years?’

‘Why shouldn’t she get what – Sonny’s house? Sonny’s house, you mean?’

Marseilles began to nod, but Herman couldn’t stop asking. ‘Are you saying she didn’t get it? The house?’

These remarks led Marseilles to reappraise Herman and, in due course, he reached a conclusion. ‘Either you are really fucking dumb, or no one’s told you.’

‘No one tells me anything.’

‘Didn’t you get no solicitor’s letter?’

‘No, I didn’t,’

‘No letter? Where you been?’

‘I’ve been in hospital, like I told you. I’ve been hardly able to move for weeks.’

‘No kidding!’ Marseilles always admired a cast-iron alibi.

‘No, I’m not kidding. I’ve had gallstones.’

‘Gallstones? Where did you have them?’

‘What about this letter I should have got?’

‘Oh yeah! He left you the house and everything.’

‘Who did?’

‘For fuck’s sake.’ Marseilles gave the departing hearse a backward nod. ‘Him.’

‘Sonny?’

‘God help us, you were supposed to be the fucking clever one in the family.’

Herman’s response that of all the judges and juries of the land.

‘Marseilles, you’re bullshitting me.’

‘No I ain’t.’

‘How do you know this thing then?’

Marseilles grinned again. He was recollecting a choice memory. ‘When I arrived this morning, Mom was shouting over the phone about how her brother was a selfish shit.’ He nodded over Herman’s shoulder to someone behind and Herman glanced around. Cleopatra had come to a stop about twenty yards away. She was glaring at him as she gripped the handles of Oliver’s wheelchair.

Herman turned back. ‘So, me – I got the house?’

‘Yeah. That’s what she told me when I wondered why she was saying her brother was a selfish shit. I tell you though, this has hit Dad even harder, even though it ain’t his brother.’

‘Hm, he’s looking like he’s gone down a long way,’ Herman murmured distractedly.

‘Worse than ever. How about your old dad, still missing?’

Herman tried to focus.

‘He isn’t missing, he’s dead.’

‘Didn’t he go missing in Smethwick?’

‘Hm? Yes. Yes he did. And then he died.’

‘Sorry, I’m out of touch.’

‘It doesn’t matter. He wouldn’t have come today anyway.’

‘Nah – can’t blame him.’

‘So, Uncle Sonny has left me his house, eh?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Why, I wonder?’

‘That’s what everyone else is asking.’

‘It’s so strange. He didn’t like me more than anyone else.’

Marseilles shrugged, coughed and pulled out a carton of cigarettes. He offered one to Herman, who shook his head. ‘These are smuggled in, half price.’ He lit up and drew deeply.

‘Where you staying tonight? At your Mom’s?’

Marseilles nodded and exhaled a great cloud of smoke. Abruptly, he looked around. ‘Where’s that vibe coming from?’

Across the road, where there was a row of neat terrace houses, a car stood on the kerb with the radio turned full up while a man worked under the bonnet. The words *I want to sex you up, baby*, reached them on a melodic breeze. ‘Good track,’ Marseilles remarked.

‘Shame no one videoed the service,’ Herman said, now that they were talking about the entertainment industry, ‘you know, so that we could remember it in years to come.’

Marseilles looked at him, struck by this idea. He began to nod. ‘Yeah.’ He drew on his cigarette again. ‘Talking about cameras, I’ve got some to sell. Brand new. Unopened. 200 mega pixels. Half price to you.’

‘I’ve got a camera. Thing’s a waste of money. See, I didn’t even bring it with me today, did I? Couldn’t be bothered carrying it.’

Marseilles sighed. The sigh set off a hideous cough. He hawked, spat, glanced at his cigarette, dropped it on the ground and crushed it out.

‘I’m not going to the cemetery,’ he remarked dourly. ‘My girlfriend didn’t want to come, so I got to catch up with her in town.’

‘I’m not going either. I’ve got a meeting on.’

‘So do I. I mean after I’ve seen my girlfriend. That reminds me – I can get you some rock, really pure merchandise.’

Herman laughed when he realised Marseilles was trying to sell him crack cocaine.

‘Nah, I’ve had too much of that shit lately.’

‘Too *much*?’

‘In hospital, man. They pump you full of crap like that.’ He began to stroll towards his car.

Marseilles walked with him on the way to his own car. ‘Fuck, I didn’t know gallstones could put you off rock.’

‘Yeah. I tell you, it makes you think.’

Marseilles grunted, just as if anything in his experience had ever made him think.

‘Like today has,’ Herman added.

‘Today has what?’

‘Made me think.’

‘About what?’

‘Death.’

‘Why’s that then? Oh, got you! Sonny’s dead, ain’t he? Seems different because it’s him, somehow.’

‘Like it’s not such a bad thing after all?’

‘That’s it!’

‘I thought so too. And I’ll tell you this, Marseilles, his last will and testament has really cheered me up.’

‘Yeah?’

‘I’m going to get a will drawn up myself so I can cheer people up after I die. I’d hate to think of them being really miserable, just because I’ve gone to a better place. What do you think?’

‘Sure, it’s a great idea.’

Herman tapped Marseilles on the shoulder. ‘But only the coolest dude in the family will see the benefit, eh?’

Marseilles’ dimmed eyes grew bright. He gave Herman a brilliant smile. ‘Hey, thanks, guy!’

Just then, Herman heard the crunch and crackle of gravel under solid rubber wheels and he glanced around apprehensively. Sure enough, Aunty Cleopatra was pushing Uncle Oliver’s wheelchair straight at him. He hopped to one side and the wheelchair lurched to a stop. Uncle Oliver sat up suddenly, propelled by the force of momentum and collapsed back down again.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ Aunty Cleopatra screeched.

‘Only trying to save my legs,’ Herman said, getting ready to jump again. He found he was facing her alone.

Marseilles had already taken evasion action.

‘See you later, Mom,’ he hollered, as if he were a mile down the road, rather than just getting into his car ten yards away. He didn’t so much as pause for a reply and Cleopatra ignored him anyway. He hit his horn and pointed at Herman as he screeched away.

‘You’ve really upset us, boy. You’ve cut us to the quick.’ His aunty’s voice quivered with emotion.

‘No I haven’t.’

‘Yes you have.’

‘How?’

‘You bloody well know how. Never in my life would I have thought it of you, Herman.’

‘Thought what, for Christ’s sake?’

‘You hear that, Ollie? Denying everything and befouling the air with blasphemy, just like Sonny used to.’

Herman glanced down at Uncle Oliver who stared back through shockingly sunken eyes. He was past talking to.

‘I’m denying everything because I haven’t done anything.’

‘Don’t you care about the havoc and heartbreak you’ve caused?’

Aunty Cleopatra had bawled loud enough for the guy fixing his car across the road to pop his head over the hood and peer at them with interest.

‘I didn’t ask him to leave me his house,’ Herman said, trying not to raise his own voice.

‘You were in cahoots with him. Must have been.’

‘No.’

‘Thieves stick together.’

‘Aunty!’

‘You little devil, you were the bright hope of the whole family. We thought you were a nice boy with your own little flat and a career in City Hall. What would your mother think, if she found out?’

‘Don’t worry, she’s not getting anything off me.’

‘She doesn’t deserve what she does have, her and her damned plumber!’

Herman’s temper flared up. ‘Stop shouting,’ he shouted back. And then he yawped, ‘Ow!’

Aunty Cleopatra had pushed Oliver’s wheelchair against his shin. Oliver was trying to throw a punch – his thin, wasted arm, waving like a broken stick. Herman dodged this way and that, keeping out of range. She couldn’t manoeuvre the wheelchair fast enough and, giving up, she bayed. ‘We’ve got to go to a burial now!’

Herman massaged his shin resentfully.

‘Go, I’m not stopping you!’

‘Showing your true face, eh? At least we knew where we were with Sonny. He didn’t hide behind a big false smile.’

Herman could not tolerate being described as worse than Sonny. He let rip at the top of his voice. ‘Don’t compare me to that scumbag!’

‘Why not? You’ll end up the same way, you hear?’

‘Look, fuck off! Right?’

‘If Marseilles was here!’

‘He’d try and sell me drugs again!’

‘You’re going to die in prison, just like him.’

‘Marseilles?’

‘Sonny!’

‘I’m not!’

‘You are!’

‘I’m not!’

The vicar appeared at the church door and Cleopatra paused to glare daggers at him, perhaps wondering where she’d seen that round, bland face before. He greeted them all on the way to his Volvo estate, giving them a beatific smile that temporarily defused Cleo’s wrath, leaving her nullified.

That’s when Herman made a dash for his car.

Chapter Twelve

He got the solicitors' letter next morning, it had been delayed in the post, and this confirmed what Marseilles had told him. Herman now owned Uncle Sonny's four bedroom Edwardian end of terrace house. There was also fifty thousand pounds in cash.

Herman read the letter twice and then sat down to think about his uncle.

More than anything else he was baffled as to how a sociopath like Sonny had managed to acquire any property and savings. In a way, Sonny's was an amazing success story. A dangerous psychotic providing a customer-focussed service and profiting by it. His was a triumph against all the odds.

Of course, Herman had been deeply mystified as to why Sonny should have left him his house and money. Success or no, Sonny was nevertheless a mad man who hated everyone, his family most of all. To Herman's knowledge his uncle had never done anyone a good turn in his life. So why him? Maybe the answer lay in how upset Cleopatra had been to have been cut out of his will. It could be that the temptation to lacerate his sister's feelings outweighed the natural aversion he must have had for doing his nephew a good turn.

After a quick breakfast, Herman drove over to the house on the way to work, just to take a look at it from the outside. He would collect the keys from the solicitor's office during his lunch break and have a look inside then.

He also strolled down then gully that ran behind the house. The gully was lined by a row of ramshackle garages. Sonny's car was locked up in one of these. He could just discern the reflection of light off the fender by putting his eye to the gap between the aslant doors. When he had the time, Herman told himself, he would sell the thing. Or maybe just scrap it.

This thought especially brought home to him the power and reality of possession. He could feel it coursing through his veins. It was warm. It insulated him from the cold weather, and more besides. As he drove to work, the brutish features and uncouth manners of the masses swarming around the city centre no longer abraded his finer feelings. He floated into City Hall smiling to himself with fond contempt for the plankton and nematode worms that teemed there.

Talking of which, even before he reached his desk, Fennimore appeared beside him.

'Hi, Herman. How did the funeral go?'

Strange, but Herman had just been thinking about that.

'Great, Graham. Just Great. It turned out miles better than I could have ever expected.'

'Yeah? Good, good. Anyway, Jeff will see you at two.'

'Jeff? What for?'

This pert question taxed Fennimore's ever-fragile patience.

'About your complaint, Herman, old mucker.'

Herman had forgotten his superiors' little plot to keep him out of the sun and to make their summer nights even more agreeable by knowing Herman was chained to

his desk nights while they sipped cocktails in the company of friends and family.

‘Oh, that. Okay.’

Fennimore couldn’t repress a smile of anticipation.

‘I’ll have a chat with you afterwards.’

He strolled away, displaying the slight limp he had developed since returning from his skiing holiday. Herman sat at his desk and consulted some memos blindly, his mind cast into confusion.

One of his colleagues, Bryan, who sat at a desk near enough to have heard the conversation, trundled over on the casters of his chair. For a lad of nineteen, Bryan was remarkably bereft of energy and he travelled on casters and wheels as often as possible.

He almost yipped with excitement. ‘What’s the grievance?’

Herman contained his irritation. ‘Fennimore’s asking me to do nights.’

‘That’s all right,’ Bryan said, savouring Herman’s discomfort. ‘You got the days to yourself.’

‘No, I want to keep the nights to myself and I’m telling Jeff it’s just not on.’

‘Jeff?’

‘The departmental head, Bryan.’ Herman said drily.

It took a moment for Bryan to digest the enormity of this statement. Herman was mixing it with giants. But was not he – Bryan – a giant also?

‘Yeah, Fennimore’s well out of order.’

‘You think so too? I’ll let Jeff know.’

Bryan gobbled like a turkey. ‘No, I didn’t say that.’

Herman smiled at him, ‘Didn’t you?’

‘No!’ Bryan did not blush at his own cowardice. He had fought too many battles with alien warriors, wooed and won too many gorgeous women – in DVD HD format – ever to entertain the notion that he was a pusillanimous little shit. ‘I would have said it, though, if he had asked me,’ he mumbled quickly in an inaudible voice, even while his plump legs were propelling his chair back to his own desk.

Herman looked down at his paperwork, but he didn’t read anything. His heightened awareness of being at the complete mercy of Fennimore grew more and more oppressive till he could not bear to sit still. His hands began to shake and sweat prickled him all over. He actually felt the stress deteriorating his health.

Stress induced anger. A sense of grievance followed – an acutely uncomfortable condition. Up till now, this had been the best day of his life. It was intolerable that Fennimore or Jeff, or anyone else should spoil it.

They weren’t going to spoil it.

Acting only with a hazy notion of what he was going to do, Herman stood up and walked across the office, out onto the first floor concourse, and took a lift down to the neon-lit depths of the basement, where the printing department was.

Mikhail worked here, alone, tending a huge, boiling hot photocopying machine.

‘Hey, Mikhail, I’m sick,’ he hollered over the vibratory whining of the photocopier.

‘What?’

‘I’m feeling shit.’

‘I hear, I hear,’ Mikhail said in his usual brusque way. ‘How?’

‘Palpitations.’

‘Eh?’

‘Palpitations. And it’s like I’m suffocating or something.’

‘Fuck,’ Mikhail went to fetch the sick book from his desk, ‘I can’t spell that shit.’

Balbatashuns, what's them?'

Herman leaned over the sick book. 'Palpitations. Here, I'll write it.'

'No.'

Herman spelt it out as Mikhail's scrawled painfully slow. 'And nauseous.' He began to spell that out too.

'You taking the piss now? I don't know what this is – nawshush? What the fuck is nawshush?'

'Look, I've got to go,' Herman snarled back. 'Hurry up, I can't stay here. I'm sick!'

'Fugg it, you write it out then!' Mikhail flung the sick book on his desk and flounced away.

With his feeble grasp of English and chronic impatience, Mikhail had been Fennimore's personal choice for the department's first aid officer.

Herman found a pen and thought a moment before changing his diagnosis to shooting pains in the lower back and a chronic shortness of breath. He entered the information in the book, being careful to imitate Mikhail's blocky handwriting and misspellings.

Mikhail came back, his mood, as mercurial as Russian foreign policy, had waxed mild and solicitous.

'You all right, man?'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look, see what I've written?'

'Hmm.' Mikhail nodded, as compliant now as a tame bear. He gave Herman's entry an unseeing glance, took the pen and countersigned Herman's entry. 'You going now?'

'Yeah.'

'You really sick?'

'Yeah.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'Hey guy – you take care, now, eh?' Mikhail was always at his most solemn when he said goodbye, like it was going to be forever and ever.

'Thanks.'

Herman left the printing department and headed up through reception and out into the car park. His sense of triumph was intoxicating. The cars all around sparkled in the sun and the bad feeling Fennimore had inflicted on him evaporated. The mere act of getting into own his car and driving away fully restored his previous buoyant mood.

At first, he was baffled by his behaviour. The fact was, real autonomy was alien to him, rather than the fake autonomy that television and the management told him he had. If he had thought about it at all, he'd still be at his desk. His escape had been a physical rather than an intellectual decision. It was only now, after the event, that he realised Fennimore no longer had any power over him. He didn't need a job anymore, because he owned a house and he had money in the bank.

He drove directly to Sonny's solicitor's, on the outskirts of the city, to collect the keys, and from there he went to the house.

Herman guessed Aunty Cleopatra possessed her own copy of the keys. He took a tour of the house and immediately noticed a vase and a picture were missing. No doubt she had been round to take her pick of the free offers and many other items would have vanished also. He couldn't care less about them, but the car, Sonny's taxi, was a real concern. Could she possibly have driven that off?

He checked the garage – that heap of splintery, rotten planks held together with rusty wire. The car was still there. A five-year-old Ford Escort in reasonable condition. The gully which the garage faced was narrow and Herman saw that getting the car in and out would require ten minutes of shunting. He decided he would park his own car on the side street.

Having gone back in the house to count the locks, he went out and brought replacements, together with the necessary tools. He hurried back and set to work straight away. He could brook no delay in securing his property from Cleopatra's sticky fingers. It was gratifying to imagine the stupid look on her face as she found her key no longer fitted.

He was busy adding a draw bolt to the back door for extra peace of mind when his mobile beeped.

'Hello?'

'Herman!'

'Mr Fennimore!'

'Where are you?'

'At home.'

'Then why didn't you answer your home number?'

'I can hardly move from my bed, I've got my mobile next to my pillow.'

There was a pause. 'So what's the matter with you?'

'I feel terrible.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. The doctor will be visiting me tonight.'

'It says here in the sick book – a bad head ache. That's all.'

'That's the wrong entry, Graham, I watched Mikhail write my symptoms down.'

'Symptoms? What are they?'

Herman closed his eyes and recited from memory.

'Shooting pains in my back and . . . and . . . and I can't breathe. That right! I can't breathe.'

'Is it serious?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

'Be honest, do you think it's something you might die of?'

'I could do,' Herman said, trying to be helpful. 'It all depends on what the doctor says. Anyway, I hope not.'

'Do you?' Fennimore was incredulous.

'Yes.'

'But then, if you do die, at least you'll have got out of working nights.'

'Oh, but that's not the issue.'

'I think it is.'

'No, you're wrong, Mr Fennimore.'

'I'm what?'

'You see, if I live, I'll withdraw my objection. I've thought it over and I've decided I'd love to work nights. I needed time to think it over, that's all.'

There was a gasp at the other end. 'Herman – it'll be in your best interests to be here tomorrow morning.'

'But only if I live, right?' Herman was grinning broadly.

Fennimore was silent for several seconds. 'You listen up,' he hissed, 'everybody here is already carrying your dead weight round their necks like a fucking . . .' He stopped abruptly.

Herman gleefully seized the moment. 'That really isn't a remark appropriate for a

manager to make, Graham.’ The reproof oozed down the line like rancid syrup.

‘Okay, okay,’ Fennimore said, writhing verbally, ‘everyone gets ill once in a blue moon. No one in management is ignoring your case. We talk about your case all the time, Herman.’ There was a pause. He took a deep, juddery breath. ‘And we’re not unsympathetic. Let’s say your condition leaves you in a wheelchair, well there’s no need to worry, you’ll be as welcome here as all our other disabled colleagues. But, Herman, whatever you do, don’t linger. Please. We’ve got a massive workload and crippling deadlines. So, walk in here, or come rolling in on wheels, I don’t mind, but either way, come sooner rather than later, eh?’

‘Either way, right, got you.’

‘Goodbye.’

The line went dead.

He laid the phone on the kitchen table and finished screwing the draw bolt to the back door.

As he worked, he thought about the power that Fennimore had wielded over him for so long. Ultimately, this power was derived from the mortgage company. If he missed an installment of his mortgage on the apartment, they would throw him out, and if he didn’t have a job, he couldn’t pay. Ergo, Fennimore had the power to make him homeless if he so chose. The mortgage companies, the banks and the bosses all colluded to keep the plankton at their mercy.

But he wasn’t a specimen of plankton anymore, was he?

Herman picked up his phone and called the number of the financial advisor (Arnos Praveen) who had sold him the mortgage on the apartment. He needed to ask some searching questions.

‘Hello, this is Herman Sylvester.’

‘Hello!’

‘How are you, Arnos?’

‘Hey Herman, how’s it going?’ Arnos still had a squeaky voice that made his constant state of enthusiasm sound like hysteria.

‘Great. How about you?’

‘Totally great, man!’ Arnos laughed uproariously.

‘You’re not too busy to have a quick chat?’

‘Nah, fire away.’

‘Thanks. My uncle’s dead.’

‘Commiserations, guy!’

‘And he’s left me his house and fifty grand in cash.’

‘Whoa! Nice one!’

‘You know that mortgage you sold me.’

‘Don’t pay it off! You’ll get stung for a fee. Move into the house and make it your main residence and rent the flat out to pay off the mortgage as usual. Don’t tell the tax office, they’ll never find out. They’re really rubbish these days.’

‘I thought I might just sell the flat.’

‘You’ll gain a lot more in the long term by keeping it. Hey, that’s what *I’d* do. And it’s what you *do*, not what you *say*, innit?’

Herman saw the light. ‘Yeah!’

‘By the way, this is off the meter. Free advice. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Oh – okay. You know these mortgages you sell – did you ever take one out?’

‘Had to,’ Arnos admitted with uncharacteristic gloom. ‘I can’t even get a better deal for myself. But, that’s life.’

‘Shame.’

‘Well, it’s only money.’

‘That’s very sanguine.’

‘I don’t give a shit, if that’s what you mean.’

‘Yeah, it is. But why?’

‘But why what?’

‘Why don’t you give a shit?’

‘Oh, that. Yeah! I’m getting married next week and then we’re straight off on our honeymoon!’

‘Fucking hell,’ Herman murmured. He was genuinely amazed. ‘Congratulations,’ he added.

‘Yeah, four weeks in the Maldives.’

Herman laughed. ‘No shit? Finally settled down, eh? Well, well, well. I have to say . . . I never expected it.’

‘You didn’t expect it! I tell you, it came at me out of nowhere. Like a boy racer’s car. Screech! Splat! We only met a couple of weeks ago.’

‘No way.’

‘Yup. And I still can’t believe how it happened.’

‘How did it happen?’

‘Well, get this for a thing. Last year Lisa – that’s her name, by the way.’

‘Nice name. I like it.’

‘Thanks man. Last year, Lisa was travelling in Peru, right?’

‘Peru?’

‘She went to see this city in the jungle, abandoned and like built by the Incas. Years ago. Hundreds of years ago.’

‘Ah, right. The Incas. I know who you mean.’

‘She’s in the jungle with the Incas and she decides to climb to the top of this temple. It’s shaped like a pyramid. Like them in Egypt. Only these ones have steps in the side and they’re flat on top and there’s a big stone where they ripped the hearts out of people.’

‘The Incas did?’

‘And their guts and livers, even while they were alive.’

‘What the hell for?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Just chopped the poor bastards up?’

‘Yeah, that’s what they did, the Incas.’

‘Angry shits, eh?’

‘And on this stone, where they did the chopping, guess what Lisa finds?’

‘I don’t know?’

‘Guess!’

‘Honest, I can’t. What did she find?’

‘Try.’

‘No.’

‘Go on.’

‘No!’

‘My business card!’

Arnos must have foreseen that Herman would be rendered completely speechless by this revelation, because he allowed plenty of room in the conversation for a long, long pause.

At last, Herman said, ‘You were never there at that temple?’

‘I was never there.’

‘Just your business card?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Did you drop it anywhere in Peru?’

‘No. I’ve never been to Peru.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes!’

‘Incredible,’ Herman mumbled, wondering why he was still talking to this idiot. ‘So, she had your number now?’

‘She didn’t call me straight away, obviously. She kept the card and then, just a few weeks ago, she needed some financial advice and that’s when she finally called me.’

‘Right, right.’

‘So we met up for an informal discussion, at *Sam’s Place*. You know that wine bar?’

‘Yeah, but I’ve never been there. And I’ve never been to that Inca temple neither.’

‘Why are you telling me that?’

‘I mean, it seems to me, one of your clients left your card there, see?’

‘Oh, sure. That’s a possibility. Actually, that’s what must have happened.’

‘Maybe they got attacked. Peru is a dangerous place. Maybe they were even . . . well, no, surely not.’

‘What?’

‘They wouldn’t have been sacrificed – their hearts torn out and all that shit, would they?’

‘No?’

‘No, I think that’s too far fetched.’

‘You never know with those Peruvians.’

‘Who says that?’

‘Lisa.’

‘She’s from Peru?’

‘No, she was there on holiday. I told you.’

‘Oh yes. Sorry.’

‘She’s from round here. She only lives a few miles away.’

‘And you’ve never met before?’

‘Not once. That’s not surprising, a lot of people live in around here.’

‘Yeah, fucking millions of them.’

‘Though, as it happens, her cousin works in *Sam’s Place*, and every now and then Lisa does a few hours behind the bar.’

‘Anyway, congratulations guy,’ Herman said briskly. ‘Lisa sounds . . . it’s almost too good to be true.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ Arnos exclaimed happily.

Chapter Thirteen

Dr Brown managed to keep smiling while Herman meticulously recited the list of symptoms he had memorised from the internet the night before.

The last thing Herman wanted was the wrong treatment, or any treatment that might make him ill. And so he added together the symptoms of Post Natal Depression with Sick Building Syndrome to keep Dr Brown guessing.

Dr Brown did look mildly perplexed. However, he spent disappointingly little time trying to figure out what the problem was. Rather, he scratched his chin for a bit and, with a shrug, prescribed a mild sedative.

He advised Herman should take a week off work and come back if he didn't feel any better.

Herman protested a little too much that he would take everything easy and rest, and then almost ran out of the surgery because he had hardly a minute to spare.

He drove directly to his uncle's house, or rather his own house, and began the arduous job of refurbishing it.

But a week was not nearly long enough to get the project finished.

Even working flat-out every day for one week of sick leave he only managed to strip the walls. He got home to his flat on Sunday night too tired to invent any new symptoms for Dr Brown and so when he saw him on Monday morning he simply repeated the old ones word for word.

Dr Brown's baboon smile barely faltered. He took a blood sample for further investigation and prescribed a somewhat stronger sedative.

'I feel so tired,' Herman complained. 'I'm aching all over. Sometimes it's agony just to move.'

'I'm going to give you two weeks off this time. Contact me if there are any changes.'

'Two weeks,' Herman mused. 'That might do it. However . . . ' After papering the walls he would have to start exposing the floor boards before sanding them down and applying a hard wearing varnish – could he really manage that in two weeks? ' . . . the thought of going back actually makes me feel physically sick.'

'Just how long would you like then?' Brown grinned.

'A month.'

'Okay. Take a month off. And try to forget about work, will you?'

'I'll probably go straight to bed.'

Dr Brown nodded and beamed at him.

'That's right, take it easy. Just like Sunday morning.'

Herman raced from the doctor's and stopped off at a pharmacy to get his prescription, resenting every second of the five minutes it took the clowns behind the counter to find the sedatives. He also brought a box of pep pills and an extra large bottle of a high-energy juice drink – recommended for athletes. He guzzled this as he hurried to his car.

An hour later he was back at the house to let in an electrician, who he set to work testing the sockets, while he himself started yanking the carpet up.

From then on Herman was hard at it. He put in a twelve-hour day for the next four weeks, fuelled by Chinese takeaways and pep pills.

In the end, the house was not only refurbished, but immaculate.

It looked fantastic.

Herman, meanwhile, had deteriorated badly. The trace pesticides and other chemicals in the Chinese food had left him sallow and rashy, while the pep pills had kept him awake nights and he had become haggard and hollow eyed. Looking at himself in the bathroom mirror on the night before he went to see Dr Brown again, he decided not to repeat his pretend symptoms, he had real ones now that needed treatment.

Dr Brown stared at Herman. His broad, square-toothed smile was fixed.

‘How do you feel?’

‘Absolutely exhausted,’ Herman said, and was about to expand on this when Brown asked an unexpected question. ‘Tell me, Herman, were you close to your Uncle Sonny?’

‘Oh God, yes,’ Herman said. ‘He was very much a father to me.’

‘And what about your real father?’

‘He might as well have been my uncle. The kind you never see. But Uncle Sonny was not like that. He was like a proper uncle. And a proper father too. He could have been like an older brother as well, if he’d been thirty years younger. Actually, Uncle Sonny, so far as I’m concerned, was pretty well the whole family wrapped up into one. Apart from Mom, of course.’

‘But she’s no longer with us either,’ Dr Brown observed.

‘No. Southend-on-Sea.’

‘That’s right.’ Dr Brown rubbed the bridge of his nose, a strikingly human gesture for one so apelike. ‘I wonder,’ he mused and opened a draw in his desk, from which he took out a glossy pamphlet. ‘There’s an interesting new approach to chronic fatigue produced by a profoundly deep-seated depression. Recent research suggests that major emotional traumas can effect permanent changes to the structures of the brain and alter the way it functions, causing distress that goes on for the rest of people’s lives.’

These remarks frightened Herman, till he remembered that the so-called trauma Brown was talking about was the death of Uncle Sonny, an event that had done him a power of good.

No, Herman was quite sure that what he needed was a long rest and vitamins – not a pamphlet.

‘You think my uncle’s death has something to do with it?’ he queried mechanically.

‘I don’t want you to get anxious about it. Lets not stir up the demons. Rather, let’s look at the options instead. See how you feel about them.’

‘How about some vitamin tables and another week off work?’

‘But Herman, what I want to suggest is some cutting edge medical treatment.’

‘Really?’

Well, if it was that good, he might try it anyway, whether he needed it or not.

Dr Brown opened the pamphlet and spread it on his desk so that they could look at it together.

Herman found himself presented by a realistic diagram of the back of a generic human head. A large section of the scalp was shown folded back and a perfect circle of cranium had been removed to expose the brain.

‘What happens here,’ Brown began enthusiastically, tapping a pointy forefinger at

the aperture in the diagrammatical head, 'is your basic trepanning procedure. That is to say, taking a nice, neat piece of skull away to reveal what's known as the dura mater, one of the fleshy envelopes that enclose the brain. These are excised so we can have a good look at the cortex, just to see whether it's nice and grey. If it's not nice and grey, well . . . you're in trouble. Any other colour for the brain is bad. Next, we fix the pulse module onto the dura mater, see, and glue the section of skull back in place and staple the scalp down. The pulse module is now sitting in the brain case, where it needs to be, and can be activated by remote control.'

'I see, I see,' Herman nodded. 'Yes, yes . . . but why?'

'Why?' Dr Brown asked in surprise. He peered at the text in the pamphlet and read it aloud, as if for the first time, 'The pulse module emits a low frequency signal that in three cases out of ten has been shown to neutralise the effects of acquired depression syndrome.'

'But in seven out of ten cases it doesn't work.'

'But then there's no risk attached to the operation. You won't wake up a cretin. At least, that's very doubtful. And if it doesn't work, that's not the end of the world. They'll just reopen up the scalp, pull the plug of bone out of the skull and remove the module, after which we'll be free to examine other possibilities.'

Herman leaned back in his seat and considered the procedure. 'I'm not so sure.'

'What you have to ask yourself,' Dr Brown said brightly, 'is whether you want to suffer with debilitating depression, or to do all you can to overcome it. Remember too, that when you're depressed everything seems hopeless and a waste of time. I suppose that's how you feel about this procedure now.'

'I wouldn't say that, exactly,' Herman said warily. 'I shan't dismiss it out of hand, I don't think. Only, I was just wondering, how about another couple of weeks rest and perhaps some vitamin tablets?'

'But we've already tried that, haven't we?' Dr Brown remonstrated gently, 'And it seems to have made you ten times worse.'

'That's true,' Herman conceded, feeling too tired to argue. However, on reflection, he was leaning strongly away from the idea of having his cranium trepanned. 'You're right, I need a change and, as it happens, I'm in the middle of moving into a house. Uncle Sonny's. He left it to me. The flat I'm in now is very noisy. It's on the edge of a four-lane highway. So, I'll be getting out of that rat hole. And then too, I'll be changing jobs soon enough. In fact, it's already like I'm not working at City Hall anymore. They say a change can do wonders. I think a change will work wonders for me. In fact, I'm determined to try the change first, before the trepanning. Although I'm certainly not saying the trepanning couldn't do wonders too. How about if I give the change a chance first, and if it doesn't do the trick, I'll try the trepanning?'

Dr Brown favoured him with his radiant baboon smile. Honestly, he was more monkey than the monkeys.

'Excellent idea! We'll put this procedure on hold for now.' He began to fold the pamphlet away.

'Do you agree I can shake it off without a brain operation?' Herman asked.

'The brain is still not well understood. A change of scenery might just do it. And I'd say getting out more and seeing your friends from work would help too. Don't you think?'

Herman pondered for a moment and found himself concurring.

'Yeah, actually, it'd be kind of nice to see the fellows of City Hall again and say farewell before I resign.'

In fact he couldn't wait to savour the moment.

So, when he got home, Herman called his closest colleagues and invited them to a 'going away' party next Friday evening.

The last person on his to-phone list was Caitlin.

It had been over a month since he'd seen her last, and she hadn't called. Probably a little bit ashamed of herself, now that she knew what sort of man he was – the sort to stand up to Fennimore. He calculated that word about their titanic struggle must have reached her. Would her spineless accountant paramour have stood up to Fennimore like that? Herman simply couldn't imagine it. And then, when Caitlin discovered that he had his own house and was heading for a career in marketing, he was certain she'd fall back into his arms.

'Hello?' It was a man's voice that answered on Caitlin's phone. A deep vibrato, smooth and imperious and topped off by the twonk of a tennis ball skimming over the net somewhere in an exclusive country club.

'I was hoping to speak to Caitlin. This is Herman.'

'Herman?'

'Herman.'

There was an intriguing pause, during which the phone was put on secret mode.

'Hello Herman, it's me, Steve.' He was back again. Slick and confident.

'From accounting?'

'Yeah.'

'Caitlin –'

'Thing is, Herman, she's not well.'

'Oh dear.'

'She's in bed, laid up.'

'Sounds serious.'

'Oh, it's nothing serious . . . not in the grand scheme of things.' Just then, something odd happened to Steve's confident delivery. It began to grow awkward. 'I mean, it's just a cold, that's all. It's not –' Incredibly, the voice halted in confusion.

Herman looked at the phone. 'Well, that's good then, isn't it?'

'Of course it is. Yes.'

There was another hiatus and Herman began to terminate this mysterious conversation.

'Right, so I'll –'

But Steve began to talk again, even though the more he went on talking, the more baffled and constrained he sounded.

'The fact is, Herman, it's only right I should tell you, but Caitlin and I are engaged.'

'That was quick.'

'Yes, I suppose – but then, er, we both sort of agree that, er, life is, um, sort of short.'

'It is short,' Herman agreed readily. For one thing, it was too short to talk to Steve.

'Yes. Er, you know, I don't want this to sound heartless, but Caitlin's been through a lot and ah, you just can't expect anything from her really. No, I'm sorry, but I don't think it's fair on her. Or on you either, of course. I'm sorry.'

Herman wanted to scoff. Steve was making it sound like he was going to die for the love of . . . Caitlin. God, what an insult to his intelligence. But he didn't scoff. It was more important right now to fabricate a dignified excuse for having phoned at all.

'Well, Steve, this is how it is, I happen to be going away.'

There was a strained murmur of acknowledgement at the other end. Steve was suffering. But why?

Herman pressed on quickly.

‘And I’m clearing out the flat, because I won’t be needing the furniture.’

‘Ah.’

‘So I thought Caitlin and yourself, newly engaged and just starting out, you might want your pick of it. Save yourself loads. Free on collection.’

Steve gulped – in a semi-aristocratic way, of course. ‘I don’t know what to say, Herman. That’s massive. That’s massively generous. Christ.’

‘It’s nothing really.’

‘No, no, it’s massive. But Herman, we will be getting our own furniture.’

‘No problem. It’ll all be heading for the tip anyway. So, Steve, send my best to Caitlin. I hop she gets better soon. And congratulations and all on the engagement. Have a great future.’

‘Oh, and you too . . . ’ The guy paused to gulp. More inscrutable distress! ‘Damn, I mean . . . You know what I mean.’

‘No.’

‘Right! Gotta go, Herman. And, you know, good luck, mate.’

‘Yeah, yeah. Bye.’

Chapter Fourteen

Friday night, at eight o'clock, Bryan and Ahmed arrived at Herman's flat with Henry.

These three were the only colleagues of his who had nothing better to do tonight than attend his party – though he had been expecting Linda too. In fact, Linda was the only one he really wanted to see.

Linda worked in human resources and during their last three review meetings he was sure he'd sensed something of a rapport. So, he'd taken the plunge, popped into the office during lunchtime (giving the housing department a wide berth) and invited her in person. She had been amazingly flustered, flushing bright red, and unable to answer at first. Then she had finally accepted, as if turning him down would have been an act of cruelty. That was strange. Herman could only assume she was conflicted by her attraction to him. Leaving the scene of the crime with a spring in his step, he would have staked his life on betting they'd be in the throes of a passionate affair before the week was out.

'Sorry, Herman. Linda couldn't make it,' Bryan told him. 'But not because she didn't want to, but because her aunty died with cancer.' Bryan's eyes grew wide in his doughy face as he said this. 'Sorry.'

'Not everyone who gets cancer dies of it, Herman,' Henry added reassuringly.

Henry, who was anywhere between thirty and fifty, had a crouching demeanour and a wince of a smile. He liked drink because, unlike women, a bottle never said, 'NO!!!!!!'

'So, anything to drink?' There he was, with a question he'd made all his own.

'Over there.' Herman motioned towards the refrigerator where the booze was.

He would never do more than motion for Henry's benefit. Any greater expenditure of effort seemed such a waste.

Turning to the others, he said, 'It's a shame about Linda. It would have been nice to have some female company.'

'She was devastated by her loss,' Ahmed said. As was his wont, he spoke at a rattling pace, so that these five words came out as one.

'Best way to tackle grief is to have a laugh,' Herman said, thinking of his uncle's funeral. 'She should have come over, we'd have helped her forget all about it.'

'But would she have been able to forget cancer by coming here?' Henry mused aloud, handing out cans of beer to the others.

'That's a point,' Ahmed said. 'But then, lots of people get cancer, so the chances are that at any party she'd meet at least one person with cancer. Isn't that right?' He turned to the others for intellectual and moral support for his argument. Henry winced his smile and Bryan giggled. Ahmed pulled the ring on his can of beer and added brightly, 'Anyway, what kind of cancer is it, Herman?'

'Eh?'

'What kind of cancer is it?'

Herman tapped on the top of his beer can absently. He had lost track of the conversation already. 'Dunno. You tell me.'

'Doesn't seem right to make us guess,' Henry said, flinching at his own wit.

Bryan snickered.

‘It’s nothing to be ashamed of,’ Ahmed urged smoothly. He took a swig of beer. ‘Anyway, you’re looking pretty good, guy. Healthy. No one would think you got cancer.’

Herman laughed, joining in with the festive mood.

‘You’re confused, lads, I’ve never been healthier.’

‘Of course you haven’t,’ Henry said. ‘Like Ahmed says, you’re looking better than ever.’

Herman thought about these consoling words and thought about the notion of Henry wanting to console him. In this way, he came to the right conclusion.

‘Oh for sure, you’re right, Henry – I do look like absolute shit. But that’s just exhaustion. I can assure you, I haven’t got cancer.’

‘You so sure?’ Henry winced a wink.

‘Oddly enough, yes. I had a complete health check before they finally diagnosed gall stones and I was given the all clear for cancer. It’s official.’

‘But Fennimore said you got cancer!’ Bryan exclaimed, his face collapsing under the crushing blow.

The others looked just as distressed in their own flinching, twitching ways.

Herman had pooped the party.

‘Ah, I’ve got you now.’ He almost laughed. ‘*Fennimore* told you I’ve got cancer, and *you* believed him. Ho, ho, ho.’

Henry fired a question over the rim of his comforting beer can. ‘So, you’re definitely saying that he’s lying?’

Herman smiled.

‘Not lying as such, Henry. A case of wishful thinking perhaps.’

Henry winced – in pain this time. The world was dust and ashes for him now.

‘But you’re leaving City Hall,’ Ahmed protested in another sentence of one syllable.

Herman hadn’t told anyone that yet and he gave Ahmed a hard look. Fennimore must be cooking up a new scheme, something along the lines of having him relieved of his post for being incurably ill.

‘Yeah, I suppose I am quitting, but that’s because my uncle died and left me a house and a pile of money, so I’ll be moving into the house and letting this place out. I want to go full-time with my marketing course at University, you know, to improve my job prospects and get to meet some nice girls while I’m at it.’

Herman’s words were shark’s teeth plunged into the hearts of his three guests and, as a consequence, they visibly deflated like the cheap fairground balloons that they were. Ahmed’s narrow shoulders rose and sank, a fledgling who would never learn to fly, while Bryan’s puppy fat became the lard of an old dog. Henry was forlorn, like a snake that had been forced to shed its skin before the new one was ready.

There was a brief pause for reflection and, during this pause, a large quantity of neurons in Herman’s brain were freed up to make a new connection. Caitlin must have heard the rumour that he was dying! Hence that strange, strangled conversation with Steve. That smooth, glossy, de lux shit had been guarding her against the embarrassment of talking to an ex partner who happened to be doomed to extinction.

Herman supposed that was very chivalrous of him.

Fortunately, his train of thought was diverted by Bryan. The poor kid was suffering.

‘You sure you’re not dying of cancer?’

He was pleading with Herman not to destroy the illusion.

‘Nah,’ Herman said heartlessly. Then an intriguing idea occurred to him. ‘Hey – you didn’t have a whip round for me did you?’

Henry brightened a little.

‘No!’

The other two were also cheered a little. At least they could tell themselves they had retained some measure of dignity and not bought him a gift.

Even so, the blithe spirits of the three guests were moored forever more to the sullen earth and they stared at the floor in a gloomy silence.

Herman smiled at them and waited patiently for the party mood to ignite under the warm, damp compost.

Ahmed spoke first, more slowly than usual, though still twice as fast as normal people. It was a bittersweet recollection of better times.

‘My gran had cancer.’

They raised their eyes to him, faces lit by wistful smiles.

‘So did mine,’ Bryan chuckled sadly.

‘Bowels?’

‘No, spine.’

‘Spine?’ Ahmed was impressed.

‘A cousin of mine,’ Henry intoned, ‘died with leukemia. It was a rare kind and the doctors didn’t diagnose it correctly at first.’ He darted a look of reproach at Herman. ‘That’s what I assumed you had. Not the rare form, of course, but leukemia, because leukemia is more common in younger people. My cousin was only nineteen.’

Bryan chirruped innocently, ‘I’m nineteen.’ And then, having spoken these fateful words, his eyes grew round in the appalled realisation that there was a chance he might not make twenty.

Ahmed’s usual utterances had till this fateful evening consisted of gags, cracks and whiz-bang clap-trap about computers – but now he delivered himself of something sort-of deep.

‘I’m not too religious, me, but when I hear stories like that I start to wonder whether there really is an Allah.’

‘There probably isn’t a God either.’

That was Bryan’s contribution.

Herman was exasperated.

‘Oh, fucking hell. Can we start to cheer up now. This is a party.’

‘You say your uncle died,’ Henry asked him, displaying a heroic determination to pursue a subject that had become almost too painful for words, ‘was it with cancer?’

‘No, it was a stroke. Hit him right out of the blue.’

‘And he left you all his money,’ Bryan squeaked, sensitive as never before to the inequity of life.

‘And his house, remember.’

‘Are you sure he left it to you?’ Henry asked. ‘Rather than to someone else called Herman? Is there someone else called Herman in your family?’

They looked at him expectantly. Herman sucked his teeth and thought hard.

‘I’m not sure. Maybe. Though, probably not.’ His guests exhaled and their deflation (begun with the incision of sharks’ teeth, remember) was now complete.

Herman began to feel sorry for them.

‘How about your Grannies? Did they leave you anything in their wills?’

Ahmed and Bryan exchanged a glance of pure misery. They shook their heads, avoiding his eyes.

‘Big family. Nothing filters down,’ Ahmed mumbled.

Herman sought to console him.

‘See, I’ve got the advantage of coming from a broken home. The goods don’t get spread around, because too many people hate each other’s guts.’

‘How come then your uncle didn’t hate your guts?’ Bryan asked, baffled and puzzled.

‘Because we virtually never met. So he hated my guts less than anyone else’s.’

‘I sort of know how he felt,’ Henry bleated. ‘Sort of – we’ve hardly seen you recently. That must be why Fennimore thought you had cancer.’ He poured some beer down his throat and shook his head. ‘And we believed him.’

‘You wouldn’t have seen me anyway. Fennimore was trying to force me to work nights.’ He smiled at Bryan. ‘He’ll have to find someone else now. Someone young enough not to crack up with the lack of sleep and sunshine.’

Bryan flounced with indignation and therefore wobbled, but did not reply. After tonight, who knew what horrors lay in store for him?

‘So, you went on sick leave to get out of night shifts?’ Henry asked.

‘No, I took sick leave to redecorate my new house. It was a swine to do.’

‘You’ve got another job lined up, after the marketing course?’ Henry was cross examining him now, and he wasn’t playing the nice guy either. ‘Or is it going to be the next twenty years on welfare?’

‘Oh, I’ll get another job all right,’ Herman said capaciously. ‘When I’ve got a degree in marketing.’

Henry transferred his can of beer from one hand to the other hand.

‘What’s wrong with that idea is Fennimore won’t let you get another job.’

‘And how would that laboratory rodent manage that from its stinking little cage?’ Herman inquired with a benign smile.

‘When he gets a request for a reference, he’ll know you haven’t died of cancer, won’t he?’

‘So fucking what?’

‘Then he’ll know that you were taking sick leave just to decorate at home.’

‘Whatever Fennimore thinks, he has to write a standard reference. He’s not allowed to put in anything bad. That’s the law, you know.’

This stung Ahmed.

‘That doesn’t seem right.’

Bryan’s jowls rippled as he nodded agreement. Henry, meanwhile, bowed in his head in defeat.

‘Of course. That’s right. Fennimore has got to write you a good reference. You’ll get a great job, no problem.’ He chugged more beer. The world was cruel, but sweet liquor still pressed herself eagerly to his trembling lips.

And yet, (and Herman sensed this) coming from Henry, any sort of prophecy spelled doom.

Even a prophecy of good fortune.

Especially a prophecy of good fortune.

Chapter Fifteen

Within six weeks Herman's old flat, with its panoramic view of four groaning lanes of unremitting traffic, was rented out to a Lithuanian couple. It would be very different from their former home beside the boreal forest of purple pines. Still, he was glad that they seemed such a homely pair. It would mean, surely, that they would eliminate every lingering vestige of his former existence in the flat. Other vestiges of his former life were fading fast. He hadn't seen Cleo and Oliver again and never expected to. But for old time's sake he kept in touch by checking the obituary column in the local paper.

Then there was work. In fact, almost as soon as he had quit – just seconds before Fennimore could institute dismissal proceedings – City Hall had lost virtually all reality for him. It could have been a termite mound he'd been watching on late-night TV while half asleep. His conversations with its resident creepy crawlies seemed no less dreamlike.

So, he had a brand-new life now, except . . . somehow or other, he hadn't been able to break one last link with the past.

Like his Uncle Sonny had done before him, Herman received an occasional visit from Shandra. Try as he might, he couldn't sever the connection. Indeed, she was due today at one o'clock.

While he waited he cleaned the house. Having her around always reminded him that he had standards to maintain.

He finished vacuuming and then took the trash to the bin, which stood in the small paved yard to the rear. As soon as he walked out into this, he couldn't help noticing the huge man who slumped over the wall that divided his yard from next door's.

Herman stopped and stared. He determined straight away that the man wasn't trying to climb over. That manoeuvre was clearly beyond his capacities. He didn't look at all well. Indeed, he seemed to be using the wall, which was about five feet high, like a crutch, supporting himself with it, while his long arms and mammoth-sized hands dangled over on Herman's side.

Herman was a little reluctant to step within their reach. But then, he didn't want to appear a coward either and so he strode past the man, lugging his bag of trash and giving him a curt nod.

The man's face was blessed by peculiarly delicate features, floating on the pool of collapsed and gradually deliquescing flesh that is the principal ingredient of a man over seventy. His large round head, over which the thin light brown hair was plastered, lolled a little. But the man smiled back at Herman's silent greeting and responded cheerfully.

'Don't mind me, I've just had a very minor heart attack.'

Herman put the trash in the bin, carefully replacing the tin lid before he answered.

'Really?'

'Yes, it's not too bad at all. Certainly nothing to bother the ambulance service over, I don't think. It's not the biggie.' He held out one giant hand. 'Jake Morrison, your neighbour.'

Herman shook the hand, which contained no force beyond its own considerable weight.

‘Herman. Pleased to meet you.’

He frowned as he spoke. It looked messy having Jake draped over the wall like this. Obviously the fellow couldn’t stand unaided. He was not, therefore, an example of the usual free-floating type of plankton. Jake was an even lower life form – a static filter feeder. That was bad. It meant he might still be there when Shandra arrived.

Herman didn’t like the idea of that one bit. Shandra might see him, engage him in conversation and lower his (Herman’s) standing in the neighbourhood.

He hadn’t had a preference up till then, but now that he came to think of it, he believed that he’d prefer Jake to die of his heart attack. Then at least he’d slump down out of sight.

‘Are you sure you don’t want me to call an ambulance?’ He asked. ‘Get you shifted to a nice comfortable bed?’

‘Oh, don’t bother yourself. I’ll see how it goes and if I take a turn for the worse, I’ll call for an ambulance myself.’

There was no way to hurry him up, it seemed. ‘You know,’ Herman remarked, almost sadly, ‘I always wondered who lived next door.’

‘Oh, we’re a quiet couple, Kate and I.’

‘Yes, you are. I appreciate that.’

‘And then, I’ve been in hospital on and off.’

‘I was in hospital, not so long back.’

‘Have they got you taking drugs?’

‘Nah.’

‘Me, I’m on loads. Bucketfuls.’

‘I’ve got an uncle like that’

‘How’s he doing?’

‘Terrible.’

‘I know how he feels.’

‘Personally, I think the drugs aren’t keeping him alive at all.’

‘What is then? I’d be interested to know. I’m always ready to look at alternative therapies.’

‘His dog. She’s a mangy old bitch, but they have a special bond.’

‘Stroking a dog is supposed to be good for your blood pressure. It calms you down.’

‘Stroking his dog wouldn’t calm you down. Do you have a dog?’

‘No.’

Herman was beginning to have second thoughts. Jake was right, he and his wife were quiet, and they didn’t even have a dog to make the noise for them. If Jake did die now, then some noisy neighbours might move in. People with ten barking dogs instead of none. Better the devil you know, eh?

Herman decided he didn’t want Jake to die after all.

‘Perhaps you should get a cat. Stroking a cat would be just as beneficial for your heart, I believe.’

‘I appreciate you’re trying to help. However, I already have enough pets.’

‘Fish?’ Herman said hopefully, recalling fish were even quieter than cats.

‘No. I keep stick insects.’

‘Stick insects?’ For some reason, he didn’t like the sound of that.

‘I’m not fussed about fish. I like cats, though. But I wouldn’t actually want one, let alone a dog. Even a very long thin one. Too energetic.’

‘But then, you can’t stroke stick insects . . . or can you?’

‘No. They’re more for staring at.’

‘And are they soothing to stare at?’

‘You’d think so, since they hardly move. However, I very rarely stare at them these days.’

‘They don’t play much of a role in your life then.’

‘Not for years and years. I was an enthusiast once. When I was a boy. Since then, their interest for me has waned. I’ve always kept them fed, of course, but beyond that, they were always just there when I came home from work. Usually where I left them in the morning. Kate hates them and that’s made them more of an issue than perhaps they deserve to be. We don’t disagree on many things, she and I.’

‘She wants you to get rid of them?’

‘Yes, but she never says so. She leaves it up to me. You see, she knows that, deep down, I want to get rid of them myself.’

‘You could just let them go free. Reintroduce them into the wild.’

‘They’re entirely domesticated. They’d perish within days. Just killing them would be less cruel, but I haven’t the heart to do that. I’ve always hoped they’d die out naturally.’

‘Why didn’t they?’

‘They’ve bred. As one generation passes away, another arises to take its place. Just like with us human beings, Herman.’

‘You could try keeping the males and females apart.’

‘Impossible to sex them. The ideal solution would be to keep each individual in its own tank and if I were made of money that’s what I’d do.’

Herman had changed his mind again. He wished that Jake would die now. Right now. In that way he could be sure he would never have to talk about stick insects again.

He sighed.

‘Well, how about partitioning the tank, then, so that each stick insect was in its own little habitat?’

Jake smiled pityingly.

‘No room in the house for wood working. Kate says I create enough mess as it is. You wouldn’t be interested in keeping a few stick insects, perhaps?’

‘No.’

‘Sure?’

‘Frankly, I don’t like animals of any description in the house. I like to keep the place spick and span.’

Jake nodded vigorously.

‘That’s right. Kate and I hear the vacuum at least once a week.’

‘I don’t disturb you, I hope?’

‘Not a bit of it. Apart from the vacuum we don’t know you’re there. Sometimes Kate will say, “Do you think he’s dead?” Then, sure enough we’ll hear the vacuum, regular as clockwork every Thursday and Saturday night. Though, you know, your vacuum does sound very odd. Like a ghost moaning away, Kate said.’

‘It’s an old model.’

‘That’s what I thought. That’s Kate for you. She gets spooked very easily, bless her. How long have you been living here, Herman?’

‘Four months.’

‘Just you?’

‘Just me.’

‘Because Kate assumed you were a couple, but I said it might just be one man, or woman. Or a man and an occasional woman. Anyway, I said, it’s not unnatural these days for people to live alone. No pets, you say?’

‘No pets.’

‘But then, to be fair, in my day it was more unnatural to live alone than it is now.’

‘You had your stick insects.’

‘I had my stick insects. Still, people were suspicious, even though I got a lot of praise too. Lots of my neighbours would say thank heavens we don’t hear parties next door, or rows, just the vacuum every now and again. They were grateful, like Kate and I are now.’

‘And I’m grateful too, Jake. You are as quiet as the grave. I don’t even hear a vacuum.’

‘We have a very quiet vacuum, especially imported from Finland. Still, I’m surprised you never hear it. I suppose you’re out at work.’

‘I’m between jobs.’

‘Ah, I’m sorry to hear that, Herman.’

‘There’s nothing to be sorry about. I quit my last job. I was bored by it.’

Jake’s eyes grew wide in surprise and admiration.

‘How wonderful! I mean, to have the nerve to do that. So many people are in a rut at work and then, after twenty, or thirty years of complaining and grouching over their job, they’ll retire and literally keel over and die within months. And why? Because they miss their job! Now, isn’t that sad?’

Herman frowned and shook his head.

‘Why would they miss their job if they hated it?’

‘I don’t know, Herman. I’m merely speaking from experience. Me, I worked in the police for over thirty years and I can honestly say I never enjoyed a single day of it.’

‘You worked in the police?’

‘That’s right. And there hasn’t been a moment since I’ve retired that I don’t miss the department, even though I hated it so much.’

‘But you haven’t keeled over yet.’

‘Because I got married just before I retired and although I miss the police department, my life still has meaning. Are you married, Herman?’

‘No, like I said, I live alone.’

‘Oh yes, that’s right. It was Kate who thought you were part of a couple. I said to her, “Sometimes men want to remain young and fancy free, just like I was once.” It was a joke, really, because I wasn’t young and fancy free when we got married, not by a long chalk. And when I was young and fancy free, so many years ago, I didn’t enjoy it. I spent my days in the department and when I wasn’t there, I was off boozing down at the bars. Thing is, even though I didn’t like my job, at least I felt part of something when I was there, so that when I came off duty it was like the tide of life rushed away through my fingers. I wasn’t alone in being alone though. There was a merry band of us. Some got stomach ulcers from the alcohol, others went down with psychosis. Me, I got my dodgy ticker.’

‘I never cared for alcohol.’

‘Me neither. I drank because the lads did. See, I was alone, like you, and I kept myself so busy at the department, and so drunk when I wasn’t there, that I didn’t give myself the time to realise that I was unhappy. Terribly unhappy. Not till the holidays came round. Every year I was forced to take a vacation and that’s when I was forced to face the barren waste that was my life. It’d take me weeks to get over the holidays.’

I was left sick with despair.’

Herman was interested in hearing about Jake’s experiences as a policeman. He had always nurtured a soft spot for the police, because they were so troublesome to his relatives, and especially to Uncle Sonny. For this reason, Herman changed his mind once again about Jake, especially as he had apparently finished talking about his stick insects. His latest thinking, therefore was that Jake shouldn’t die of his heart attack – just yet.

‘Still, you saw plenty of action when you were on the force,’ Herman said expectantly.

‘Not action, as such. I was in surveillance.’

‘Ah, but that’s interesting too.’

‘I had hoped so, before I joined the department. The reality was that I spent months at a time sitting in rooms with the drapes opened just enough so that I could stare out between them with a telescope. Then there were lots and lots of hours spent monitoring recorded conversations down in the basement of Scotland Yard.’

‘Scotland Yard, that’s glamorous.’

‘Sounds glamorous, you mean.’

Herman stared at that woeful face with its stored misery of loneliness and angst and realised there would be no enthralling stories of crime detection. Yet again he changed his mind. Perhaps Jake *should* die of his heart attack. It would be for the best.

He gave him one last chance.

‘So you were based down in London, at least.’

‘Sure, with the Met.’

‘London would be a great place to live.’

‘It was okay.’

‘Better than round here.’

‘In many ways, yes.’

‘Then why did you come up here to retire?’ Herman asked irritably.

‘I didn’t. I was part of a countrywide investigation and here in Orbaton City was where I had my last stake out.’

‘Really? A stake out? Where about, exactly?’

‘Right here.’ Jake grinned, displaying teeth that had been worn down to half their original size by the onward rush of beer. ‘In the house where we’re living now.’

‘You’re joking.’

‘It came up for sale and I decided to buy it. I’d already met Kate and we needed somewhere to live.’

‘But, who were you staking out?’ Herman asked, even as the answer blared out in his head.

‘Sonny Auguste. Did you ever meet him?’

‘He was my uncle.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t consider myself tarred by the same brush. Still, you took me by surprise. Wasn’t he just a third petty criminal? I wouldn’t have thought he’d warrant the cost of a surveillance team.’

‘You’re underestimating him. He was the middle man for a money laundering operation and he couriered drugs and stolen goods. We wanted to nab his connections as much as anything else. So we bugged the house and set up cameras front and back to keep an eye on his comings and goings.’

Herman felt the back of his neck prickle with shame. Was it not possible the cameras and the bugs were still in place, recording the comings and goings of

Shandra?

Right then, he *definitely* thought that Jake should die of his heart attack.

‘I know it was for a good cause and everything, but it does sound a little bit intrusive.’

Jake smiled.

‘Naturally all the bugs have been removed, Herman. And the cameras.’

‘Where were the cameras? Did you drill a hole through the wall?’

‘No, of course not. See that bird box?’

There was indeed a bird box fixed to the rear of Jake’s house, about eight feet up and angled strangely, so that the aperture for the birds pointed down at the rear door of Herman’s house.

‘The camera was in there?’ Herman exclaimed. ‘Really? I’d have thought Uncle Sonny would have been suspicious.’

‘He never noticed it, even though the birds couldn’t get in, because of the camera lens. Did you notice it, the bird box there?’

‘No, I never did.’

‘There’s one on the front too, to cover your front door.’

‘The cameras have been taken out, you say?’

‘Of course, expensive kit like that wouldn’t be left behind.’

‘I suppose not.’

Jake heaved a wistful sigh. ‘Times have moved on since I first joined the department. There’s no one sitting in dark rooms anymore, staring through a gap in the drapes. Everything’s automated. So, on this job – my last one – I just had to sit in the living room to keep an occasional check on the monitors and transfer files onto a computer disk. Aside from that, I was free to wander up town and relax. That’s how I came to meet Kate. She works in the City Information Office. You know the one on the square?’

‘Yes,’ Herman murmured. He still couldn’t take his eyes off the bird box.

‘True love, Herman. It was a revelation to me. All the years I’d spent in stuffy rooms, seeing the spring come and go through the lens of a telescope. I missed all the beauty of it. Sometimes I’d see love birds strolling down the street and deep down I wondered why that wasn’t me out there. Now it is, after a fashion.’

‘Well, I’m pleased for you.’

‘You seem annoyed.’

‘Oh, I’m just thinking about my Uncle Sonny. He annoyed me. Like a lot of my family did. So, this house has been bugged and staked out. I know they’ve taken the equipment away, but still, I feel my privacy has been invaded.’

‘But it hasn’t, Herman. How did you come to live here yourself?’

‘Uncle left the house to me in his will. I know why he did that too. He wanted to vex my aunty – his sister. She expected to get hold of it instead.’

‘I’m surprised he made a will.’

‘Yes, so am I. He didn’t think he would have the imagination to realise that he’d die one day. To be honest, though, I myself didn’t believe the world was going to be so lucky to get rid of him so soon. Lucky world. Not that it was soon enough, mind. When you bought your house, weren’t you worried about when Sonny got out of jail and moved back in next door?’

‘No, my mind was quite at ease. Between you and me, Herman, I can tell you he wasn’t coming out. We had enough evidence to mount a case against him that would keep inside till the bitter end. It just so happened that he got sent down for assault before the other charges were brought. We were just waiting for a confession so as to

avoid a trial.’

‘He wouldn’t have confessed.’

‘Oh, he would have faced trial if that’s what it would have taken. We really weren’t going to let go of him, ever.’

‘Great!’

Herman had another change of heart. Despite everything, he couldn’t help feeling grateful to anyone who’d worked so hard to put Sonny behind bars and for that reason, he sort of hoped now that Jake didn’t die straight away.

Jake looked at him thoughtfully.

‘You know, Herman, you seem enthusiastic about the law.’

‘I suppose I’ve seen the good it does at close hand. I know that having Uncle Sonny in prison was a positive thing to happen. A great benefit to society as a whole. It raised the quality of daily life for everyone else. More people like Sonny should be put in prison and left there for longer. Forever, preferably.’

‘Good, very good. You say that you’re between jobs? I’m just wondering now, seeing that you’re a big, fit, strong looking lad – have you considered a career in the police?’

‘The police? Me? No. See, I might look like a physical person, but I’m not really.’

‘I can tell, listening to you, that you’ve got an active mind. More of a thinker than a doer, perhaps?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, do you know who we need more of in this country? Even more so than police officers on the front line?’

‘No.’

‘Good prosecutors. Lawyers who really relish putting criminals behind bars. A lot of lawyers like criminals too much, because they pay well and every time they offend and get caught, they provide more work, see?’

‘Yes, I see.’

‘Prosecuting counsels don’t get paid nearly so well and that puts law graduates off because it is money and not justice which fires them up. They’d rather sweat and toil for the villains and gangsters than protect innocent hard working citizens.’

‘So that’s why they get away with it. No decent prosecutors. I always wondered.’

‘It’s worth thinking about.’

‘I could go to law school.’

‘They’d welcome you with open arms.’

‘Prosecutor. Yes, I like the sound of that.’

‘A lower salary wouldn’t put you off, would it?’

‘Christ no. The one thing I learned in my last job was that job satisfaction is all-important. Every day would be an absolute pleasure if it meant putting someone like Uncle Sonny in the clink.’

‘You’ve cheered me up, Herman. I think I’ll live.’

‘Good for you, Jake!’

‘Lets see.’ Jake pushed himself upright from the wall and stood up right. He towered over Herman like a rotten tree trunk. ‘Amazing, I feel miles better. Hey, I apologise if I’ve taken up your time.’

‘Not at all. Though I am expecting a friend soon.’

‘A friend? That’s nice.’ Jake thrust a huge hand out towards him. ‘Nice to have met you, Herman.’

‘Likewise,’ Herman said, taking the hand. It was cold, just like Jake had died of his heart attack after all. ‘We’ll see each other again, no doubt.’

‘Sure.’

Herman went back into the house and started to brew coffee. He brimmed with excitement. The idea of becoming a prosecuting lawyer really did enthral him. In his gratitude for the inspiration, he hoped Jake would make a full recovery from his heart attack.

He began to dream of an interesting and fulfilling career. However, beneath the elation something nagged and troubled. What was it?

Staring down pensively into his unfilled coffee cup, even though the kettle had boiled, he worried away at the question.

What was wrong?

Or rather . . . *who* was wrong?

Shandra!

He’d neglected to remember that he had been associating with an intimate of Sonny’s. What an idiot he was! How could he hope to be allowed to practise the law if they knew he had criminal connections?

Except, surely he was safe. There was no proof . . .

Unless Jake had lied!

Had the police taken the surveillance cameras out of the bird boxes, or not? That was the question. If not, they would know he had consorted with a prostitute. His glittering career was in tatters before it had begun!

And now, Herman really wished Jake had died of his heart attack. Years ago. Because there would have no peace of mind till later that night, when he could put a ladder up to the bird boxes and satisfy himself that Jake had been telling the truth and the cameras had been removed. In an anguish of shame he recollected the many times Shandra had visited. She could not be called, on any account, a casual acquaintance.

He was still pacing the room, lost in the throes of his ignominy and exasperation, when there was a knock at the door.

Chapter Sixteen

Herman was already shouting at her before he'd fully opened the door.

'You've got to go!'

Only he found that he wasn't talking to Shandra. He was talking at a tall, heavily built man wearing a conservative grey suit. The guy couldn't be less like Sandra. For a start, she wasn't bald – yet. Nor did she have eyes swimming around independently in small, round spectacles.

The man smiled at Herman in a knowing way that he took immediate exception to. All the more so because the man's mouth was so full-lipped. Almost to the point of being freakish.

'Hello, Mr Sylvester, I'm Terrence Wolseley.' The man stuck out a great fat paw of a hand. 'From *The Appropriation of Criminal Funds Agency*. Just call us ACFA.' Herman was about to take hold of the paw when it was withdrawn. 'Sorry, I should show you my identification.' Wolseley hunted through the pockets of his jacket and produced his laminated mug shot, which had a red logo and wording that Herman couldn't bring himself to read.

'Thanks for that. What do you want?'

Wolseley put his identification away.

'May I come in and have a word now, or should I come back?'

'No, no, come in,' Herman said, playing innocent by instinct, even though he was innocent anyway. A second later, he remembered that Shandra was on her way. That could prove awkward, couldn't it?

He hesitated.

'Sure you're all right about it?' Wolseley asked.

'Yes, of course. Please.' Herman stood aside and Wolseley stepped in.

They went to the livingroom and sat opposite each other. Wolseley turned down the offer of coffee or tea.

'I'm between appointments and I don't want to overdose on caffeine. Did you get our letter at all?'

'What letter?'

'We sent it last month.'

'I didn't receive it,' Herman said, and when Wolseley looked sceptical, he added crossly. 'Why do the authorities believe the Post Office is infallible? I've had loads of mail go missing.'

'Haven't you complained?'

Herman sighed.

'Life's too short. I haven't been well.' Vexed now, he asked. 'I have things to catch up on, so, if you don't mind, can you tell me what you want?'

'Oh, if you're expecting someone, I'll call back.' Wolseley put his big hands on his knees as if he were ready to leap up and leave.

'No, I'm not expecting anyone,' Herman said defensively. 'It's just that I have other things to do.'

'Me too. So, to get to the point, this concerns the money your uncle left you. Fifty

thousand pounds. We have gathered enough evidence to prove most of it is derived from criminal activities. Probably he also brought the house with vice money. However,' Wolseley smiled with patient resignation, 'we can't do anything about that because the leads have gone cold. They've all died.'

'What do you want me to do about it?' Herman asked, never thinking to deny that Sonny profited from vice.

'Nothing,' Wolseley chuckled. 'You just have to sign a form and we'll expropriate the funds from your account.'

Herman felt his stomach turn over.

'What?'

'You just have to sign a form.'

'You want the money?'

'Want it? Yes.'

Something about Wolseley's rubbery mouth augmented the nastiness of the curt demand. Herman writhed.

'But I was left the money, how should I have known where it came from?'

'You do now. I'm not saying you can't fight us in the courts. You received the money in good faith. But what about the people who had the money stolen from them?'

'Who? What people?'

'Your uncle's many victims.'

'Yes, but I didn't do anything to anyone. Why should I be punished for the sins of my uncles?'

'But could you face them now, Herman?'

'Who?'

'Your Uncle Sonny's victims.'

'How can they blame me? I didn't do anything wrong.'

'Exactly. You're nothing like Sonny. You are a smart, upstanding, honest young person who deserves every opportunity to get on.'

'Yes, I am. And I do.'

'And yet, you are profiting through the misery of others.'

'I'm using that money to take a law degree. My future depends on it. Doesn't that count for anything?'

'Law?'

'I want to get into prosecution, even though it pays less well.'

'Great! And I think a judge would be most sympathetic.'

'Well, I'll go to court then.'

'And yet, if and when you do, the judge will wonder why a fine, upstanding and remarkably honest young man like you would feel comfortable with financing his future in law with money derived from criminal activities. Money made at the expense of human suffering and misery.'

Herman was in an agony of frustration. He wanted to punch Wolseley in the mouth. The fucker was tearing his new life down and he couldn't do anything about it.

He whelped in despair. 'But all money is made at the expense of human suffering and misery anyway. Especially the money that lawyers make.'

Wolseley shook his head.

'A judge would have to rule on specific cases, not a general moral observation. Didn't you ever wonder where Sonny got the money from?'

'No, I was just grateful to get it.'

‘The money came from couriering drugs and prostitutes. Possibly arms too.’

‘I don’t want to hear about that. It’s in the past.’

‘But if you’re going to fight the decision of the agency in court, you’ll have to hear about it. All of it, and at great length.’

‘I don’t care, I’m going to fight it in court.’

‘You’re giving it a go?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, all right. May I also say, however, you’ll be put under a great deal of personal scrutiny.’

‘Christ, is the Government so desperate?’

‘Yes, the Government is short of money. This recession has played merry hell with the books. We’re put under huge pressure to claw back the profits of crime. You’ll find yourself under a big magnifying glass because you have gained from Sonny’s generosity. You see, his legacy does tend to imply that he was grateful to you for your help.’

‘I’ll tell you what it was, malice. Sonny wanted to upset the rest of the family by leaving everything to me.’

‘Sounds far fetched.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I didn’t say it was far fetched in reality. I think it happens. Only, it doesn’t happen a lot. Generally people don’t make their wills out of spite.’

‘Uncle Sonny did make his will out of spite.’

‘Yes, but what I’m trying to say is, because it isn’t usual, my colleagues are more likely to investigate the matter, just to be certain.’

‘Well, let them, I don’t have anything to hide.’

As he said this, Herman remembered Shandra was on her way. He and Wolseley seemed to have been speaking only for a couple of minutes and yet by the clock on the wall he saw that, incredibly, half an hour had passed. She was already late. If Wolseley saw her, he’d be a witness to the fact that Herman was consorting with one of Sonny’s old associates. A prostitute too. His chances of winning any case in court would be negligible and, what was worse really, he would be reduced in the eyes of the court to a creature on the same level as Sonny. That was an intolerable thought.

‘God damn,’ he murmured. And then, somewhat stridently, he said. ‘Okay, where do I sign?’ Wolseley looked blank. ‘The money. You want the money, don’t you?’

‘Oh.’ Wolseley looked disconcerted. ‘You want to sign now?’

‘Yes? Come on then, lets get moving. Like I say, I’m busy.’

‘All right.’ Wolseley hesitated a little longer before he began to search his pockets. ‘Who would have thought notebooks could get so small you could lose them?’

Herman felt sick as he pictured Shandra knocking at the door and propositioning Wolseley as soon as she saw him.

Anal, anal, anal!

‘Here we are.’ Wolseley produced a slim, little computer, opened it, and began to tap at the screen with his fat forefinger.

The dumb, stupid tap of the finger against the screen went on and on, labourious and painstaking.

Tap, tap, tapperty . . . tap.

A full minute passed

Tap, tap tapperty . . .

‘Damn, shouldn’t have done that. Oh, I’ll start again.’

Herman jumped up and said loudly, like he should be swearing really, 'I need a drink of water.'

But instead, he could not stop himself hovering at the window instead and peering out onto the street.

It was empty. Not so much as a single straggler. Still, he couldn't bear to drag himself away, because if he did, he knew Shandra would instantly appear.

He wiped the prickling sweat from the back of his neck.

'Herman?'

He jumped.

'What?'

Wolseley had shifted round in his seat and was watching him curiously.

'You were miles away.'

Herman saw that Wolseley was holding a silver pen. It looked like a darned needle in his big, meaty hand.

He held it out to him.

'Sign in the box. But read the conditions first, please. We'll send you a hard copy later.'

Herman took the pen and scanned the lines of text in the tiny notebook, which Wolseley held up for him to read. He was unable to take in a single word. But he signed, and his signature was read by the computer and transmitted to the place where this man, Wolseley, came from.

Feeling violated, Herman returned the pen.

'Thank you.' Wolseley smiled. 'I must say, this is a lovely place. Four bedrooms?'

'Yes. Thing is, Mr Wolseley, I'm expecting friends soon.'

'Ah, that's good. Friends.'

'Yes.'

'Without friends what is life? A kind of death. Who said that?' Wolseley leaned back into the armchair to ponder.

'Who said what?'

'Oh well, never mind, I'm keeping you.' Wolseley stood up. 'Your uncle didn't seem to have any friends.'

'I'd bet on it.'

'He lost his way.'

'He was a taxi driver.'

'Yes, the ironic fallacy. That's what it's called, isn't it?'

Herman frowned.

'I've heard of the pathetic fallacy.'

'You're right, it is pathetic, isn't it?' Wolseley looked at him admiringly. 'I think you'll do well in law.'

At that, Herman felt the sting of his loss.

'My fifty thousand pounds would have been a huge help in paying for law school.'

Wolseley bowed his head in order to hide the look of contrition that wasn't there.

'Indeed.'

'But I suppose if I work my way through college, that would prove to the court that I was a decent, hard working, honest . . .'

Wolseley looked at him askance. In effect, with one eye.

'But you're not going to court, are you?'

'I meant that if I had become a barrister through sheer determination and hard

work, without help from any bequest, or a rich family and then and I was presenting my case in court. In that case, wouldn't the judge think *this guy's really worth listening to.*'

'Oh, sure, the judge would be very impressed. Or some of them would be. At least, I'd like to think they wouldn't definitely hold it against you.'

Herman showed Wolseley out of the house in grim silence, and they shook hands before he left.

As soon as he was alone, Herman closed his eyes and leaned against the door, waiting for some sense of relief. But no, before any possible sense of relief could arrive a fearful thought struck him with the force of a lightening bolt, and he dashed to the window to see whether Shandra and Wolseley would cross paths at the last moment.

There was no sign of either of them.

Herman dropped onto the arm of the sofa and stared through the window at the bus stop on the opposite side of the street. The knobbly-faced queue grew and grew. The bus came, collected the plankton and juddered away. The queue began to form again. He sat watching the interminable process for a long time. At last, it occurred to him that Shandra wasn't coming. There were no cameras. It had all been in his head.

Failure rose to fill his nostrils like the sour odour of ancient damp. The reek clung to him. He stood up and began to pace the room again, but that could not shake it. The recollection of his craven cowardice before Wolseley tormented him. It was unendurable. He couldn't get the sight of the man's ugly, deformed mouth out of his mind, smirking at him as he trounced him in his own living room. Uncle Sonny would have smacked that mouth with his hard, ringed fist. But Uncle Sonny was the son of a bitch who had put him in this humiliating position in the first place. How could he have not guessed that his psychotic uncle's legacy would not have a horrible sting hidden within it?

Herman was busy thrashing Sonny's mug – which was grinning at him from between the flames of his personal hell – when he remembered his uncle's car.

Of course! He could sell it off!

The money would buy him a little time while he looked for another job. Then he'd fund his law course himself and when he was a prosecutor it would be a matter of time before Wolseley was arrested for corruption and when that happened, Herman would be indefatigable in getting him banged up on Devil's Island till the day he died.

He found the car key to the dilapidated garage and hurried out the back of the house.

The garage doors almost fell to pieces as he dragged them open against the thick growth of late summer weeds. Beetles scuttled away from the light and headed for the safety of the shadows beneath the car.

Herman climbed into the driver's seat to check the milage on the clock and noticed a two-way radio mounted on the dash. It was new and looked more expensive than the rest of the car.

He switched it on and said, laughing bitterly, 'Sonny to base. Hello assholes, aren't you glad I'm dead?'

'Oh, fucking hell!'

At the sound of that terrified jittery voice, Herman's laughter died in his throat. 'Hello?'

'Who the fuck are you?' The voice was coming from the radio.

'Mind your own business!'

'You sound like Sonny all right.'

‘And who are you?’

‘Harris Taxicab Service, asshole.’

Herman realised now what he’d done. He was about to switch the radio off when an idea struck him.

‘Hey, still there?’

‘Get off the frequency.’

‘If you know anyone interested in buying Sonny’s car and radio, tell them I’m selling.’

‘Sonny’s car? Who *is* this?’

‘I’m Sonny’s nephew. It’s all right, I inherited his stuff. I’ve got a right to sell it.’

‘Yeah? What did you say your name was?’

‘Herman. He mentioned me?’

‘No. But you sound like him.’

‘I’m nothing like him,’ Herman snapped.

There was a pause. ‘Why do you want to get rid Sonny’s stuff. Obviously, for money – sure, but you can make money with the car. Like Sonny did. We’re a driver short. Have you thought of – ’

‘If you’re not interested in buying I can put it on Ebay.’

‘The car ain’t worth anything, so just think about it.’

‘I’m not a taxi driver.’

‘If you got a sat nav then you can do what Sonny did. I got a pickup for today, from 51 Musgrave Street. You take Chris from there to Telford. That’s twenty-two miles, or an hour and half max, and you get forty, minus ten per cent for our agent fees. That’s cash in hand. What do you say?’

Chapter Seventeen

Musgrave Street snaked languorously through an old industrial area of the city where occasional shops selling alcohol and overpriced nutrition-free groceries were scattered between factory estates and endless rows of gimcrack houses.

Chris was already waiting on the street outside number 51 as Herman pulled up. He was a large man, an unhealthy, seedy, flatfooted entrepreneurial member of the underclass, dressed in a garish blue nylon shellsuit and wearing a Burberry baseball cap from under which two perfectly round eyes goggled at him.

Herman rolled down the window.

‘Chris, for Sagmoor House, Anderson Road, Telford?’

‘Yeah!’ Chris’s round, unshaved mug beamed. The eyes were as expressionless as glass. ‘You Sonny’s bro?’

‘Get in, Chris, lets go.’

‘No. You got to open up the trunk.’

‘Got to?’

‘The clams.’

Chris turned away and walked into 51 through the opened, unpainted front door.

Herman was not in a good mood. In thirty seconds, his patience snapped. He flounced out the car and headed towards the house. Suddenly, Chris appeared at the door, carrying a wide, shallow wooden box.

‘You want to lend a hand!’ He exclaimed with loutish delight and shoved the box at Herman, who declined to take it. ‘Fair enough,’ Chris said, ‘Sonny never lent a hand either.’

Herman scowled at him and took the box. It was not too heavy and he could hold it up with one arm as he opened the trunk. Chris came up behind carrying an identical box. He breathed heavily as he laid it on the one that Herman had set down in the car. Though a big man, Chris, it seemed, was built upon poor foundations.

‘Just one more,’ he said.

‘Shut the trunk when you’ve finished.’

Herman got into the car and started the engine.

Chris flapped away on his broad feet and returned with the last box. He slammed the trunk down a little too hard. Then, instead of getting in the car, he disappeared back into the house.

Five minutes of nothing passed, during which time Herman struggled to reign in his temper. It was six o’clock and the late summer day already wore a waning orange complexion. The sinking sun glinted off the desultory traffic and a hint of dust and fumes hung in the cloying air. Herman glared at his fist clenching the steering wheel and was on the verge of driving away with the clams when Chris reappeared and got in beside him.

Herman didn’t glance around. He drove away, ignoring whatever it was Chris said in his loud, jokey voice – one that had no real mirth.

He went fast, following the instructions of the sat nav till he had caught up with the schedule before slowing down to below the speed limit. Meanwhile, Chris

yammered continuously about the local football team, asking Herman's opinion several times, even after Herman replied with nothing but a shrug.

At length, Chris grew weary football too.

'How long you been a cabby, then?'

'I'm not a cabby.'

'Then what you driving a taxi for?'

'I need the money. I'm going back to college. What do you do?'

'I'm a chef.'

Herman shot Chris a look, just to check he was as unhygienic looking as he remembered.

'Yeah? Which restaurant?'

'I'm freelance. You know, I go to houses and make the meal on site.'

'Roving chef, eh?'

'Yeah, roving too.'

They passed from the outer city suburbs into greener areas, where the houses were much larger and stood further apart. Soon the fields predominated and trees, gilded by the last rays of the setting sun, overhung the road and exuded a somnolent menace. Telford, the name of the next city, began to appear in road signs, and the fields gave way to brand new, bright little housing estates. However, the target address, Sagmoor, when they reached it, turned out to be a large, old Manse, set back on a gravel drive. Herman parked in front of the tall and elaborate porch, its pillars bloated with layers of moss.

Before he got out, Chris yawned and stretched.

Herman knew that Chris did not need to yawn and stretch, and for the first time he actively wanted to punch the son of a bitch in the head. Till then, he had only vaguely entertained the idea as a way of distracting himself from the boredom of the job. No wonder Sonny had attacked so many of his customers.

'That's forty then.'

'Money's in the house,' Chris said quickly and leapt out.

Herman clambered out and yelled across the glossy roof of the car, 'Hey!'

Chris was already at the double front doors, one of which opened at his touch. But instead of dashing inside, which Herman had expected him to do, he turned round and walked back, staring at Herman with round, brainless eyes.

'Could you help get the crates in the kitchen first? It'll be quicker for both of us.'

Herman scrutinized the outside of Sagmoor House. It was an oppressive, looming, shadowy presence and despite the lingering summer warmth in the air, it looked as dank as a swamp. He decided he wanted to hurry up and get away – fast.

Swallowing his pride, he took one of the crates from the trunk and lugged it to the door.

Chris brought up the rear with full instructions, issued in breathy gasps as he carried the other crate.

'Straight ahead.'

The hallway was tiled black and white and the walls had elaborate plaster work covered in flaking crimson paint. To one side of the wide staircase, which ran up to a balustraded balcony, was a passageway.

'Down there,' Chris urged behind Herman, sounding like he couldn't sustain his burden much longer.

The passage took them into a huge, musty smelling kitchen. A long, battered wooden table stood in the middle and Herman dropped the crate onto this.

'Just put it on the table,' Chris said, and placed his crate next to Herman's. Then

he leaned on the table for support while he recovered from the exertion.

Herman glanced around. The whole of one wall was made of metal, inset by lots of little doors.

‘That’s a range cooker,’ Chris explained, breathing hard. ‘Runs off coal and wood, but it’s all frozen up with rust from years ago. They use the gas cooker now.’

On the other side of the kitchen was a collection of fridges and microwaves, and a gas cooker, all of them battered and dirty.

‘The money then,’ Herman said.

‘I have to go upstairs,’ Chris said, moving away as he spoke. ‘Go to the television room.’

Herman followed close behind as they went back to the tiled entrance hall.

‘Where?’

‘There. In there.’ Chris pointed unwillingly to a partly opened door on the right before he began to climb the staircase, mounting up slowly, either through lack of breath, or out of sheer reluctance. When he reached the balcony, he glanced back and waved at Herman, who had watched him all the way. He was sure he caught the trace of a sly, sneering smile. He didn’t wave back and Chris vanished through the arched entrance to a first floor passageway.

Herman continued to stare for a moment, poised to follow Chris upstairs.

A muffled moan that was not quite human reached him from his right, from the door Chris had pointed to. He pushed it wide and stood at the threshold. Beyond was a small room, lit by the blueish glow of an old-fashioned television set that had the sound turned off. There was a sofa, set against the opposite wall, upon which sat an enormously obese man.

The man, his eyes sunk in shadow, turned to Herman and asked in a tentative, wheezing voice, ‘Are you hungry?’ When Herman shook my head, he added coaxingly, ‘But Chris is a good cook.’ By the flickering light of the television it was impossible to tell whether the man was smiling or on the verge of tears.

‘What’s he doing?’ Herman asked.

‘Chowder.’

‘No, I mean upstairs. He’s gone upstairs.’

The man turned back to stare at the television. ‘I never go up there.’

The television was not tuned properly and it was difficult to discern a picture. Herman thought he glimpsed a bare-chested woman wearing an old fashioned German army helmet.

He turned back to the man.

‘Is there someone else around?’

The man opened his mouth, as if to reply, but instead let out a horrible moan and clasped both of his hands to his chest.

‘Are you all right there?’

The man shook his head, his breath rattling glutinously in his throat.

‘Shall I get a glass of water?’

‘God, the pain!’

It was a cry that sent a thrill of horror down Herman’s spine.

‘Mate, try to hang on!’

He was about to pull out his phone when the room was abruptly silent, apart from the low, mad hiss of the untuned television.

Herman stared at the man, who was now absolutely still and turned dully to the television for a moment before he turned back to the man and stared some more.

A hammering started up somewhere in the house. Herman jumped and hurried out

the room. He paused awhile in the hall before he followed the sharp, insistent noise to the kitchen.

Chris was at the table, his back to Herman, smashing crabs with a small, chrome hammer. The bold black and white tiling of the floor was scattered over with cracked crab claws. One of the crates was opened to reveal more crabs to be smashed. Herman halted to watch the back of Chris's bobbing cranium.

Chris stopped hammering and turned round.

'Do you see that? Sodding crabs, not clams. Now I have to change the recipe.'

'Where's my money?'

'Eustace has it. Have you seen him? You must have, he's too big to miss.'

'There's a big fat man in the front room watching the television.'

'That must be him. He lives alone.'

'But he's dead,' Herman exclaimed impatiently. 'He just died when I was talking to him. I want to get going. You're the ride, give me the fare. Now!'

Chris stared at him blankly.

'How do you know he's dead?'

'He stopped breathing.'

'Did he?'

'Yes. So you're paying.'

'Okay, but I have to check first.'

They went to the television room and stood looking down at Eustace. He was in the same position Herman had left him and definitely not breathing.

'You wanted to check. Take his pulse if you have to.'

'Okay.' Chris did not move.

'Come on, this is urgent.'

'I know it is. I haven't been paid either.'

'Check his pulse then.'

'You check his pulse! I'm not catching the disease.'

'Okay, is there a mirror somewhere?'

'Why?'

'It'll show his breath, if he's alive. It's the best test.'

'You saw that on telly, didn't you?'

'Where's the mirror?'

'The only mirror I know about here is upstairs in the bedroom. I think Eustace keeps his money there.'

'And where's this bedroom?' Herman asked, hurrying to the door.

'I'll show you.' Chris was running after him.

Herman bounded up the staircase, expecting to leave Chris struggling for breath, but Chris stayed one step behind with ease. Herman had to fight the urge to turn round and kick him in the throat.

They reached the bedroom. It was so large it seemed to go on forever in all directions. There was just one bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

Herman looked around. 'I don't see a mirror.'

'There!'

A huge oval mirror stood in one corner. It was attached to an ugly dresser of solid mahogany. It must have been six feet across, something five men couldn't lift.

Herman heard Chris trying to suppress a snigger.

He span round, yelling, 'You fucking . . .' and swung his fist at Chris's grinning face.

The face dodged to one side and Herman found himself falling forward through

fresh air. Even before he hit the floor, his brain was lit up with blinding stab of pain. Chris had somehow got behind him and punched him hard between the shoulder blades.

The blow drained him of energy and he sprawled on the floor, horribly helpless, his hands clawing at the stinking carpet for what seemed an eternity. He finally managed to roll over onto his back.

Chris was leaning towards him, examining him with interest.

Herman lashed out with his foot. Chris moved at the very last moment and stood out of range. Herman clambered labouriously to his feet and launched himself at Chris. He swung his arms, aiming his fists at Chris's wide-eyed mug. However, Herman's fists refused to travel fast enough. It was like he was punching through muddy water. Chris parried the mighty blows with ease.

After thirty seconds, Herman was reduced to utter exhaustion.

He staggered backwards and had to lean against a cupboard for support while he caught his breath. He gulped at the fetid air, his eyes popping with the effort as he stared at Chris, who was dancing on the spot, his expression wild.

'Come on, then!' He yipped. 'Come on!'

Herman could not summon enough wind to answer. He cringed, expecting Chris to attack at any moment and deliver another agonising blow. When nothing happened, he shuffled away to one side, just like a crab, and barged into a chest of draws. In the next second, he found himself holding a tall brass candlestick holder.

'Ah!'

The weapon revived his morale. He stood up straight and confronted Chris again, brandishing the candlestick holder.

Chris leaned back and one big flipper of a foot shot out towards him. Herman swung down and the flipper was retracted. But now it was Chris who lost his balance and he went teetering backwards, flat hands paddling the air, his eyes wide in a stupid confusion.

Herman lumbered forwards and, at the last moment, side-stepped through the door, closing it behind him. Then he was clumping down the stairs.

Seconds later, his feet slapped on the tiled floor of the hallway and he ran in slow motion to the front door. He needed to lean against this for a couple of seconds, gasping, before he had the energy to open it.

The last glow of the sun was about to fade from the sky. Herman could just discern a dark figure crouched beside his car. The squeak of metal on metal met his ears and in the next instant he understood that a thief was at work.

Herman strode towards the figure, his mind blank with rage. At the sound of his heavy tread crunching the gravel the figure twisted round. Close to, Herman clearly discerned a long, hostile face, somehow glowing in the semi dark with hate-filled animus as it glared up at him. Affronted by this example of luminescent, parasitic plankton, Herman brought the candlestick holder down into it with all his might. The figure let out a nasal hoot and slumped to one side.

A sickly light flooded the air around him. Glancing up, Herman saw that one of the upper storey windows of the house was lit up and that Chris was pressed against it, his arms raised above his head and his hands splayed against the pane as he gloated at the scene.

At that moment, a police siren wailed in the distance, a mere ghostly whisper at first – languid and almost soothing, but growing ever louder and more urgent.

Herman looked down and saw that the thief wasn't moving at all. Just like Eustance wasn't.

In a panic, he fumbled for his keys, found them and was about to yank the car door open when he saw by the light from the window that the thief had already removed one of the rear wheels.

The car was propped up on a couple of ornamental stones taken from the garden.

The wail of the sirens was joined by the screech of Aunty Cleopatra.

You're going to die in prison!

It rose to an ear splitting scream and he screamed back, 'You're wrong, you fucking bitch! I'm not! *I'm not! I'm not! I'm not! I'm . . .*'

End