



THE ELECTRIFYING NEW THRILLER
BY THE AUTHOR OF COLD PRESS

OUT OF THE RED

A BRITISH MYSTERY THRILLER

DAVID BRADWELL

OUT OF THE RED

Investigative journalist Danny Churchill is hot on the trail of Graham March - the disgraced former police DCI.

The investigation takes him to Germany where he soon starts to uncover dark secrets and new depths of depravity.

Back in London, and aided by his flatmate - fashion photographer Anna Burgin - Danny's investigation intensifies, but as he gets closer to the truth, the body count starts to rise. Help is offered from the most unlikely of sources, but if Danny accepts, is he doing a deal with the devil herself?

Packed with twists and dark humour, Out Of The Red is book two in the Anna Burgin series and the sequel to Cold Press - the Amazon top 10 bestseller.

OUT OF THE RED

David Bradwell



OUT OF THE RED

A Gripping British Mystery Thriller - Anna Burgin Book 2



First published in 2018 by Pure Fiction

Copyright © David Bradwell, 2018
www.davidbradwell.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without prior written permission.

The right of David Bradwell to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988 This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Bradwell grew up in the north east of England but now lives in Letchworth Garden City in Hertfordshire.

He has written for publications as diverse as Smash Hits and the Sunday Times and is a former winner of the PPA British Magazine Writer of the Year Award.

Aside from writing, he does the occasional bit of screen acting and runs a hosiery retail company with web sites at www.stockingshq.com and www.tightsandmore.com.

For more information, please visit:
www.davidbradwell.com

... and join the mailing list for updates, competitions, free things and more.

PROLOGUE

Tuesday, April 5th, 1994

THE first line was exciting, full of daring, intrigue and the promise of the new. But nothing that came after could ever come close. He knew that. And that's why, despite the temptations, and the ease of access, he'd always resisted. Alcohol, yes. He'd get drunk with the rest of them, keeping up with the best of them. But he stayed away from anything stronger. He had a bright future. He wanted to enjoy it. He didn't realise that it would soon be no more than the basis of a tragic eulogy, and that within the hour he'd be dead.

Coralie Bruguière couldn't believe she could ever be happier. Three days earlier she'd come to London with her boyfriend, Olivier. It took a couple of days to acclimatise to the bright lights and noise of the English capital, compared to their

quaint semi-rural life in the outskirts of Lille. But by Tuesday evening they were in love with the city, and even more in love with each other.

By day they'd explored the sights, walking hand in hand through Regent's Park, puzzling out the Underground, sheltering from the English rain and buying each other gifts on Oxford Street. They'd visited Buckingham Palace, countless museums and other places she never believed she'd see with her own innocent eyes.

It was a perfect break. She wanted it to last forever, but tonight, she knew, it was coming to an end.

Coralie had met Olivier at a Christmas party just over two years ago, and they'd been inseparable since. They were perfect for each other. Both had dreams of one day escaping to the bright lights of Paris. They'd met each other's parents and their relationship had gained approval from all concerned.

It had been an idyllic period in her life. Now, though, she had the sense that something was changing. Something for the better still.

Over dinner, in a restaurant just off the South Bank, the mood was light. It was late, and they were tired, but they'd been making the most of their last full day. Their money was running out, but they'd decided to spend the last of their funds on a special meal as a fitting final memory of their time in London. The restaurant manager had found them a table as other diners headed out into the night.

The waiter took their order. They skipped the starters to keep the price down, but Olivier insisted on ordering a special bottle of wine. Then, as they waited for their main courses to arrive, he took his girlfriend's hands and looked into her eyes. She smiled in delicious anticipation as he let go with one hand, and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a small velvet box that he'd been carrying for the last three days, waiting for this moment. He opened it to reveal a calibre-cut diamond on a white gold ring.

Three days earlier, Coralie had come to London with her boyfriend. The next day she'd be returning home with her fiancé.

It was after midnight when they left the restaurant, the good wishes and congratulations of the waiting staff still sounding in their ears. Rather than hail a cab, they decided to walk back to their hotel, holding hands along the riverbank, taking advantage of a break in the clouds and enjoying the calm of the cool night air. On the far side, they could see Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. They turned right and headed towards the iconic Tower Bridge.

After a couple of minutes, Coralie stopped and pulled Olivier to her. They kissed, like characters from a Robert Doisneau poster. Olivier suggested she stand by the wall next to the river so he could take a photograph. She smiled at him. It was a beautiful pose, full of passion, hope and romance. He joined her by the wall and they held hands, looking out, across the river, watching the slow-moving water of the Thames, and listening to the sounds as the wake from a passing motorboat lapped against the wall.

They looked down to the mud bank as the water receded, and that's when they saw the body. And that's when the full horror hit.

CHAPTER ONE

*Four days earlier
Friday, April 1st, 1994*

A RHINE riverboat edged slowly downstream, under the arched railway bridge that connected Cologne to much of the rest of Germany. Danny Churchill looked out of the window and then drew the curtains for the final time.

He turned back to his desk, pressed the power button on his IBM ThinkPad 500 notebook computer, and then went to retrieve his suitcase while he waited for it to boot. It would be good to get home. A shame, perhaps, that he couldn't stay longer, but this was a long-term project. He'd come looking for answers, but every answer led to further questions of its own.

Eventually the screen showed the now-familiar Windows 3.1 desktop. Danny returned to his desk and pulled out the chair. Almost immediately his fingers were gliding over the keyboard, nudging the trackpoint to move the cursor. He double-clicked on the CompuServe icon.

Electronic beeps and whistles gurgled from the internal fax modem while it established a connection. And then he was online. The sense of achievement never diminished, nor the feeling that he was crossing the threshold into a new network-centric world. Suddenly he wasn't alone.

He opened his mailbox and checked for new messages. When the download completed, there was only the one: a work circular with details of a leaving party for one of the picture editors. He started typing a new message.

Subject: Greetings from Köln!

Hi Anna and I hope all is well.

I'm just starting to pack up now and looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.

It's been a long day but I think I've made progress. I hope so anyway, although he's a sly bastard so definitive proof is still proving elusive. I can't say too much on here but I'll tell you what I can tomorrow. Dinner?

I should be back around lunchtime. Will you be home?

I saw a bit more of Cologne today. It's a lovely city. We should come here for a weekend. I'd love to just go off exploring and not have to worry about work. It's very photogenic too. You'd love it, I think.

I'd better dash. I'm heading down to the bar in a moment for a well-deserved nightcap, but then bed beckons. Missing you.

Take care and speak soon.

Danny x

He thought for a moment. Was there anything else to add? This whole electronic messaging thing - and indeed the ThinkPad itself - was relatively new, and he still couldn't quite

fathom how it all worked. But as an investigative journalist for Britain's biggest-selling morning tabloid, the Daily Echo, he knew it was becoming ever more important to keep in touch with technology. A year ago, he'd got his first mobile phone to celebrate promotion from researcher to fully fledged writer. Now he had a notebook computer and an email address. The speed of progress was both relentless and accelerating.

He pressed send. The message made its way back to London, to the flat he shared with his best friend and confidante Anna Burgin. Would she still be awake? Probably, given the time difference. What would she be up to? He tried to picture her, on the sofa, watching TV, or with any luck, maybe working at the computer.

Despite the cost, he left the connection open while he continued packing. He'd worry about the hotel bill when he filed his expenses. The accounts department would be tolerant. He'd proved his worth, many times over.

A few minutes later a reply arrived.

Re: Greetings from Köln! - now Greetings from Camden!

Hi Danny,

Hark at you with the Köln thing. Can't wait to see you too. Yes, I'm here all day.

All's good back in the motherland. The women's air force has just merged with the RAF apparently, so I may have a career change and become a fighter pilot. I think I could fancy that if I'm tall enough, which I doubt. Life is so unfair.

In other news, I've had a lovely evening. I've just come back from a night out with Katie and Ben who are two of the writers at Harpers, although I fear the fourth glass or wine was an error, haha. I always assumed Ben was gay but apparently not, as

he asked me out, and insisted on swapping numbers when I refused. Most unexpected!

You'd be proud of me though. I still managed to turn this thing on, although God alone knows how.

By "Dinner?" do you mean you're offering to take me to dinner or expecting me to cook for you? Very happy to accept if it's the former, but sod off if it's the other. :-)

Ooh, exciting news. I've got a surprise for you tomorrow if you're up to it. A big night out to relive your youth. I'm not saying any more now so hopefully you'll be keen to get home asap.

Safe travels and lots of love.

Take care. Anna x

Danny smiled. He cherished his friendship with Anna. They'd met at university and lived together since, although never quite crossed the line into romance. They trusted each other and looked out for each other. He had a sudden surge of homesickness as he pictured her struggling with the mouse, battling with technology. He sent a quick reply.

Hi again,

Lovely to hear from you. Thanks for the quick reply.

I could imagine you in uniform. :-)

Yes "Dinner?" meant invitation to dinner, my treat, but maybe lunch would be better if we're out at night? Sounds intriguing. I'll be there as soon as I can.

Sleep well and happy dreams.

Dx

He shut down the computer, and unplugged the modem and power supply. Ten more minutes of final packing in the

morning and he'd be ready to take the train to Düsseldorf Flughafen, to catch the flight home.

With nothing else left to achieve, he picked up his key and left the room. When the lift arrived, he pressed E for Erdgeschoss. A moment later, the doors opened at reception. A guest was talking to the concierge, but otherwise all was quiet. The hotel exuded business-class calm and sophistication.

At the bar he ordered a Kölsch. The barman seemed glad of the custom. Highlights from a football match were on a TV screen at the end of the room, so Danny took his drink and made his way to a table with a better view of the game. The sound was turned off, not that he'd have understood the commentary anyway.

And with that, he allowed himself to relax for the first time in days, switching off from the constant stress and occasional danger of the investigation into the illicit sidelines of the corrupt former police Detective Chief Inspector, Graham March. One drink, then sleep. Then home for the weekend before battle resumed on Monday.

He closed his eyes, succumbing to fatigue. But then, suddenly, he was alert, on edge, sensing movement behind him. He tried to ignore it, but it seemed close, and the bar was otherwise nearly empty. He heard the rustle of clothing. Immediately he was wide awake. And then he heard a voice, softly spoken but unmistakable. A voice he'd never expected to hear again.

"Hello, Danny," she said.

He turned, and looked straight into the eyes of a ghost.

CHAPTER TWO

“OH, that was good. You should take it up professionally.”

Graham March lay back, sweat glistening on his 18-stone frame. Aurelia, his favourite Polish masseuse, opened a packet of baby wipes to clean up the worst of the mess and then picked up her tunic from the floor, moving to the side as it caught on a heel. She did up the buttons and then leaned over to check her appearance in the mirror that ran the full length of the table. She knew she was being watched from the adjacent room. It was all part of the job. All part of the humiliation.

“I'll leave you to get dressed,” she said, trying not to catch his eye. “Can I get you a glass of water?”

“Yes, my darling, I think a certain amount of re-hydration is called for, if you catch my drift.” His laugh was almost as sickening as the thought of what she'd just had to endure.

Aurelia left the room, and March sat up. He decided against a shower. He'd enjoy her scent for a little while longer. He was

nearly dressed when she returned.

“Ah, there’s a good girl,” he said, taking the glass with one hand and patting her on the backside with the other. He let his hand roam down her thigh to where the hemline gave way to nylon. She tried to suppress a shudder.

“Mikołaj says he’s ready for you,” she said. “He’s in his office when you’re ready.”

“Tell him I’ll be there in five.”

She nodded.

“See you again, Mr March,” she said, turning to leave. The maintenance of courtesy took every ounce of her resolve. The maintenance of self-respect hadn’t been so resilient.

Half an hour later, March climbed the stairs from the basement and emerged from the door of the Central Sauna massage parlour, onto the street that led back to Euston station. He frowned at the rain, his senses assaulted with the noise and pace of motion. It was suitably dark. He wouldn’t be seen, not that it really mattered any longer. He’d survived far worse. Suspended, yes, but on full pay while investigations were ongoing, although he was confident he’d be able to annul those in the near future, once his version of the truth came out. And of course, some token good works and a word, or more, in the right direction. He raised his collar and allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction.

“I’m a changed man,” he declared, raising his glass. “Cheers.”
“You’re full of bullshit, I know that.” Despite the strong words, the woman on the other side of the desk was smiling.
“Seriously, Jacqui, I’ve discovered my charitable side.”

“Right. Giving money to hookers doesn’t count, especially if

it’s for services rendered.”

March laughed and took another drink.

“If you weren’t such a cynic you might actually have a bit more success with romance, my dear. How’s the casino business?”

“All the better now we don’t have to subsidise your pension plan.”

“And again, such misanthropy. That was merely a small recompense for turning a blind eye to what I like to call your more creative ventures.”

“And again, full of shit. So, go on then, amuse me. What have you done? Giving cash to bookies doesn’t count either.”

“Jacqui. You do yourself a disservice. No, my darling, I have become involved with the homeless, protecting runaways and helping them to find a warm meal and a roof for the night.”

Jacqueline Glover started to laugh, with a throatiness harvested from many years of nicotine addiction.

“Are you serious?”

“Never more so.”

“Honestly, you’re precious. Fornicating your way through London’s waifs and strays does not count as charity. Christ.”

“I’m shocked by your inference. Seriously, I have been dedicating my time to a homeless shelter. Telling you, it’s enriching. Years and years I gave service to this community, until my current temporary reassignment.”

“Suspension.”

“Pure semantics, my dear. Anyway, it’s good for the soul to make a difference in some other tangible way. You should try it.”

“If I didn’t know you better I’d almost miss the irony. And you’re seriously trying to tell me you’re not taking advantage?”

March smiled and finished his drink.

“I can’t deny it’s always a potential perk for the pretty ones.”

They both laughed. Eventually, Jacqueline stood up, and walked over to the door. She closed it and returned to her desk.

March watched her while she did so.

“You were probably quite a looker in your day,” he said. “Obviously time has taken its toll.”

“Have you finished?”

“Just teasing you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s time to talk business.” In an instant her mood changed. March straightened up. He knew the perils of underestimating her. Of failing to acknowledge the ruthlessness at her core.

“So,” she said, when she was back behind her desk. “Tell me everything I need to know about Mikołaj.”

CHAPTER THREE

DANNY looked at the woman in front of him, momentarily lost for words. It was so good to see her, yet it raised so many questions. There was a sense of relief, of a mystery being solved, yet immediately, equally, he was on his guard.

“Clare. It’s a bit late in the day for April Fools,” he said at last. “I thought you were dead.”

She smiled.

“No, you didn’t.” She started to laugh, then indicated the vacant seat opposite. “Do you mind if I join you?”

Danny nodded, trying to take it all in. She looked well. Expensively dressed. Confident. Perfect make-up, despite the late hour. Deep down he was ecstatic to meet her again, but there was still unfinished business. And a deep distrust overlaying the sense of euphoria. What was she even doing here?

“Let me get you a drink,” he said, standing, and pulling out her chair. “What can I get you? Assuming you have time?”

“Yes, of course. And thank you. Sauvignon? New Zealand if possible. Marlborough. If not any dry white would be perfect. Thank you.”

“Coming up.” He smiled, in spite of himself. “And don’t disappear while I’m at the bar, because if you do, you’re on your own this time.”

“Touché,” she said, with a glint in her eye.

He walked to the bar, hoping she couldn’t see just how pleased she’d already made him - despite all of the trauma, the lies, the upset and betrayal. He’d imagined this moment, never truly believing it would happen. And now it had, all the scripts he’d rehearsed deserted him.

Clare Woodbrook had taken a chance on Danny when she was Fleet Street’s most respected and feared investigative journalist. He’d joined the newspaper as her researcher but soon became an indispensable assistant. He idolised her. She mentored him. They made a formidable partnership. But then, last year, she’d disappeared on the eve of unveiling her biggest-ever story, and the quest to find her had nearly got Danny killed. By the time he and Anna tracked her down, everything he thought he knew to be true had collapsed around him. Before he’d had a chance to recalibrate she’d disappeared again - this time supposedly for good.

“I’m still here,” she said when he returned with the drink. The wink was unmistakable and playful.

“Clare, I just... Where to begin? How are you? What are you doing here? How did you find me? Is this a social visit? Just so many questions. The last I heard, you were killed in a helicopter crash, somewhere in Switzerland.”

“Ah, Danny, the past is the past.”

“I’m sorry, you’re not getting off that easily.”

“Shhh.”

“What?”

“The past. Best forgotten. I’m thirty-two now, for heaven’s sake. Older and wiser. Life moves on. What’s happened has

happened and we are where we are. Which, if I’m not sorely mistaken, is a rather splendid hotel in Cologne.”

“Indeed. Nice hair, by the way. The brunette look suits you.”

“I fancied a change.”

“I’m sure. So, what are you doing here, exactly?”

“Looking for you.”

“Are you being funny?”

“No, I just pass through occasionally and I heard you were in town so I thought I’d pop by and say hello before you fly home in the morning.”

“I...” Danny stopped, laughed and shook his head. “Is there anything you don’t know?” Clare was by far the most intelligent person he knew. Despite some obvious character flaws.

“I try to make sure there isn’t.”

“Okay.”

“How’s Anna?”

“You probably already know that too.”

“Oh, you’re good. But no, it’s a genuine enquiry. She seemed a bit, well, frosty with me, last time we met.”

“Do you wonder why? She got held up at gunpoint looking for you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Honestly. I feel terrible about all of that.”

“Well she’s fine, but I’m not sure you’re on her Christmas card list. You’re not on mine either, because I wouldn’t know where to send it.”

Danny paused, waiting to see if she’d acknowledge the implied question, but she didn’t. She just kept looking at him. He tried again.

“How are you? Where are you living? What are you up to? Are you still dealing in artworks of dubious origin?”

Clare shrugged.

“I’m fine. Getting by. You don’t really think I can answer the rest of that, do you?”

“I can dream. I’ve thought about you so much. I knew you weren’t in the crash, though. I won’t ask how you did it.”

“Best not to.”

“No, but... Hey, come here. It’s great to see you.” Danny softened. He reached across and gave Clare a hug. Previously he would only have dreamed of doing that, but now things were different. In many ways they were equal. And yet he thought the chasm between them would never be bridged. She was a dangerous woman. Ruthless, cunning, self-centred and not to be trusted, although he wanted to believe that deep down she still had a heart. That she still had values, however warped they might seem to others. That somewhere beneath everything, there was still a mutual respect and maybe, in some bizarre way, they were still on the same team. Her perfume was understated, but intoxicating.

“It’s good to see you, Danny,” she said. “I keep an eye on your career. You’re doing well. And you did a good job on me.”

“You gave me all the information.”

“I know. But you turned it into something magical. I think my bridges are burned, career-wise, but that was always the case. Thankfully, I don’t need to worry about taking a salary for a while.”

“Crime pays?”

“You sound so cynical. But yes, if you want to put it like that. Although life has moved on now.”

“I can imagine.”

“How’s Graham?”

“Now that you do know.”

“Haha, of course.”

“Well, you don’t need me to tell you then.” Danny shrugged. “He’s slippery. He’s suspended by the police but protesting his innocence. I thought we had him but we always need more.”

“And that’s why you’re here.” She indicated the hotel lobby.

“I can’t tell you that. This secrecy thing works both ways.”

“Ah Danny, I do admire you. I would never underestimate you.”

“Although I feel a ‘but’ coming on.”

“Maybe.”

“Okay, enlighten me.”

Clare smiled.

“I may be able to help you.”

“Help me? Why would you do that?”

“Hold on.”

She rummaged in her bag, and took out a packet of cigarettes. The health warning was in some unrecognisable language. Hungarian? Czech? Bosnian even? Surely she wasn’t involved in that... She lit one and blew smoke at the ceiling.

“You’re still not smoking then?” she asked.

“No.”

“Good man. It’s just one of my many flaws.”

“Along with murder, theft, fraud...”

“Danny, please, let’s not dwell on details. We do what we need to do.”

“But some of us don’t kill people.”

“I’ve told you. The past is the past. I’m here in peace. I’m not going to shoot you.”

“That’s a relief.”

“You’re my protégé. I’m your guardian angel. It’s a good arrangement, I think. This wine is nice.”

She indicated to her glass. It was half empty already.

“Was that a hint?”

Clare looked up. The barman was already on his way, holding a bowl of mini pretzels.

“*Noch zwei Getränke bitte,*” she said. The barman nodded. Danny looked bemused.

“Two more drinks,” she confirmed. “I said please.”

“Pleased to hear it. You speak German now?”

“*Ein bisschen.* A little.”

“A woman of many talents. So why do you think you might be able to help me? And why would I want you to?”

“Because, Danny, the former DCI March is a pet project of mine. And I’m sure you’re going to put us all out of his misery

once and for all, but I'm equally sure I may be able to save you a lot of time. But obviously we'd need to be able to trust each other."

"Are you actually taking the piss?"

"Ah, so cynical."

"Can you blame me?"

"No, I suppose. But can we just start again?"

Danny paused to take a sip of his drink. To give himself time to think.

"Look," he said eventually, "I don't know what to make of this. Of you. I don't know why you're here. I don't know I can trust you. I don't know that you're not going to disappear again. I don't know anything about you any more."

"Okay, well, I'll be straight with you."

"But that's the point! Do you even know the meaning of the phrase?"

"Yes of course I do. You've got to get over this. Just humour me. But I will."

"Will what?"

"Disappear again. It's an occupational hazard. But we can stay in touch. You have email now."

"Yes, I do."

"It was a statement rather than a question."

"And you want my address?"

She laughed.

"Danny, I already have your address. Look at me. This is me. Clare. I'm on your side. Think of me as your secret weapon."

"I've seen what you do with weapons."

"It's a metaphor. The past is..."

"The past. Yes, I heard."

"Well then. So, can we agree we're going to help each other?"

"Whoa. Help each other? I thought you were helping me."

"Figure of speech. But let's just say we have some common enemies and helping you may also work to my benefit, to a degree."

"Oh, it's all coming out now."

The second drinks arrived. Clare stubbed out her cigarette, gave the barman folded Deutschmarks and told him to keep the change.

"Listen, Danny." She reached forward and rested her manicured hand on his knee. She was still wearing a Ceylon sapphire ring, although it was bigger than the one he kept at home in her memory. "I can't blame you for doubting me. But think of all the good we did together. We were a good team before. The best. It's different now but we work well together. I promise you - look at me - *promise you* I will never lie to you. I'm not perfect. I get that. But you *can* trust me."

"Okay. And if I do?"

"Then I'll disappear again, but I'll stay in touch. And I'll help you, which in turn will help me, although in ways that are probably hard to explain. I won't ask for anything else in return, though. Nothing material. Nothing, well, illegal. I owe you that."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Ah, Danny. No. Nothing is easy. We move in murky worlds. But we can make it easier for each other."

"Okay." He wanted to believe her. Despite everything that had happened since they'd last shared an office.

"It's perfect symmetry, albeit inverted. You're now the boss and I'm your assistant. I'm not going to ask you what you have on March, or why you're here, and what you've been trying to find out about him."

"Assuming that's why I'm over here."

"Of course. Although we both know it is. But I assume it's to do with people trafficking, because if it isn't, it should be."

Danny smiled.

"You're too good," he said.

"I try."

Clare picked up her lighter and sparked a flame. Danny's eyes were drawn to it.

“What do you know about fire, Danny?”

“Fire?”

“Yes, fire.”

“It’s hot. It burns. I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’ll tell you what I mean. Look at this. It’s just a tiny flame. In itself it’s almost meaningless. I can stop it now, look.” She let go of the button, and the flame was extinguished. She lit it again. “But what if it spreads? Think how fast it grows, and how quickly it goes out of control. The biggest, most destructive forest fire, all from one tiny spark. Imagine if you could stop it now, and how simple and easy that would be. But imagine the devastation if you don’t.”

She let go and put the lighter on the table between them.

“That flame is March, Danny. Think about it. I don’t know what timescale you’re working to.”

“And you said you weren’t going to ask.”

“I’m not. But I hear things.”

“In your mysterious murky world?”

“Exactly.” Her focused expression gave Danny a flashback to the days when she’d been at the peak of her newspaper career.

“And?”

“The general consensus is that time’s running out. We’re talking maybe a week, at best.”

“Until?”

“He lights the touch paper, if you excuse the extended metaphor.”

“It’s very colourful.”

“I’m being serious, Danny. But listen, you’re the boss. It’s your story. I’ll leave you now but just know that I’m out there. Know that I’m a good person really. Whatever’s happened in the past.”

“I’d like to believe that. But really, after everything you put us through?”

“I’m going to make that up to you.”

“Right. And if I need to speak to you?”

“I’ll give you an address. A private mailbox.”

“Like Rougemont?” Danny tensed, recalling the trouble caused during attempts to access Clare’s private box at a security company the previous year.

“No. I mean email. You can message me. I may not always reply immediately. But talk to me. Come to me if you need me. And either way I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

She offered her hand. Danny thought for a moment and then shook it.

“Okay,” he said. “Thank you. I think.”

They both stood. Clare moved forward, to give him a hug. But as she did so, he caught her glancing at something, or someone, behind him.

“Just be careful, Danny,” she whispered as they embraced. “Safe journey home.”

She let go. He watched her, making her way through the lobby and out into the late Cologne evening. As he returned to his drink, he noticed the packet of cigarettes she’d left on the table. He thought of calling after her but it was too late. He couldn’t quite shake the feeling that he might have just done a deal with the devil.

CHAPTER FOUR

Saturday, April 2nd, 1994

JUNIOR Home Office minister Samuel Elmhirst-Banks left his office in the Norman Shaw South building and made his way out onto Victoria Embankment. He crossed the road towards the riverbank and followed the path downstream, away from Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster.

The offices were quiet at weekends, but even so, discretion was paramount, especially with the omnipresent threat of a press leak. That was the very last thing he needed in the current climate. Once he was sure he wasn't being followed, he withdrew his mobile phone, extended the aerial, and tapped in a familiar number. It was answered on the third ring.

"I've followed as best as I can," she said, once the pleasantries were over.

"And?"

"Old habits die hard."

"That's no surprise. Where did he go?"

"Straight from the parlour to the casino. Victoria line from Euston to Green Park."

"It's good to see he's maintaining his interests. And then?"

"Probably about an hour there, presumably trying his luck with Jacqui if not on the tables. That was it then, though. Back out and straight home."

"Tube or taxi?"

"Taxi."

"Good. And no visitors afterwards?"

"Not before I left. I gave up about midnight."

"Okay. Good work."

"Should I keep following?"

"Please. I'll give it some thought. The press are circling."

"Understood."

He paused for a moment to let a jogger run past. He'd been in Government long enough to know how this worked, and he'd seen too many spy dramas to take anything at face value. The jogger glanced in his direction as she passed. It may have been innocent, but he'd risen through the ranks by knowing when not to take chances. There was a fine line between paranoia and due diligence.

When he was sure he couldn't be overheard again, he continued.

"Sorry about that. Have you heard anything on the grapevine about a shipment?"

"No, not so far."

"That's good. Let's hope it stays that way. That's got to be the priority. The minute that changes - if it changes - let me know."

"Shall do."

"Good girl. Keep the pressure on, then. If anything happens, or you get any sense that anyone's watching, anything at all, I want to know about it."

"Of course."

"Oh, and what's this nonsense about a homeless shelter?"

"Just that. It's a front. Pretty sure of it."

“Okay. Well, keep up the good work. It’s hugely appreciated.”

“Shall do. My pleasure. I’ll do whatever it takes, you know that.”

He terminated the call, turned left into Horse Guards Avenue and made a loop back to his office via Whitehall. There was some serious thinking to do. He was adept at dealing with pressure, but this time there was no room for even the smallest error. The rewards were there, but failure would be cataclysmic.

The time was getting closer, and the stakes were increasing with every tick of the clock.

I think I’m getting the hang of all this technology. Obviously, like most people, I mainly use the PC to play Minesweeper and Solitaire, but since Danny set us both up with CompuServe accounts I’ve been spending a bit of time online and - of course - discovering the joys of instant communication via email.

I was just re-reading his final message from yesterday when I heard the sound of his key in the door. Uniform indeed. I’ll have to keep an eye on that. Or alternatively borrow a uniform from someone.

“Anna?” he called out.

I stood to greet him when he came into the room, wheeling a suitcase disproportionately large for the length of his latest absence. It was good to see him, and, as usual, it’s any excuse for a hug.

“Good trip?” I asked, as he left my embrace in order to remove his jacket.

“I think so, but then the weirdest thing happened,” he said.

“Sounds intriguing. Cup of tea?” I didn’t really need to ask. I headed to the kitchen as I waited for him to reply.

“You’ll never guess who I bumped into last night.”

“Let me think. You were in Germany. The cast of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*, having a reunion?”

“I wish, but no. Weirder still.”

I started to fill the kettle.

“A clue then?”

“A mutual friend.”

“Really?” I tried to think. We didn’t have many mutual friends. Mine are all decent upstanding people from the world of fashion while Danny seems to spend increasing amounts of time with shady journalists. It was futile.

“No idea,” I said eventually. “Tell me.”

Danny had a curious expression. Part smirk, part shift.

“Clare,” he said.

“What?”

“Clare,” he repeated.

“*What?*” I repeated also. “Dead Clare? Clare your former boss, last seen in the obituary column?”

“The very same.”

“And not, in fact, dead then, after all?”

“Very much not, it seems.”

“And neither, by even the loosest of definitions, any friend of mine.”

“No, but she was asking after you.”

And so, Danny told me all about it. The summary of his latest enquiries into Graham March, who’d been suspended by the police under investigation for corruption, but seemed to be spending the days since then straying ever further. Then Clare’s mysterious arrival. I wasn’t very happy about it. I used to have a sneaking respect for Clare, back in the day, but that was before I discovered her darker side, and got held up at gunpoint in the process. So now my opinion could best be summed up as “good riddance”. No, not happy at all.

“And then she just left?” That, I suppose, was something.

“Indeed. She gave me a hug and then disappeared into the night.”

I was even less happy about the hug.

“Danny, this is not good news,” I said.

“Well, it is. It means she’s alive, at least. And she said she’d help me.”

“And you trust her?”

“No, not really.”

“*Not really?* Danny, she’s evil.”

“Evil’s a bit strong.”

“It isn’t! She masterminded a fraud and then killed her colleagues, never mind the trouble she caused us. She even pointed a gun at you, Danny. A fucking great big gun. How much more evil do you want? If she’s offering to help you I’d be very, very careful.”

“I will. Anyway, I doubt I’ll see her again.”

“You doubt?”

“She’ll disappear again. You know what she’s like.”

“But you’d entertain it if she doesn’t? Jesus.”

“Oh, come on. I thought you’d be pleased.”

“*What?*”

I gave him a look somewhere between incredulity and contempt.

“Anyway, what was this secret night out you’ve arranged?”

“Oh, that. I’m not sure I’m in the mood now.”

“Don’t be like that.”

I couldn’t help it. Despite Clare’s disappearance I’d still not managed to move the relationship between me and Danny up a gear. And knowing his infatuation with the woman, it seemed even less likely if she was suddenly back on the scene.

“I’ll tell you over lunch,” I said, “assuming the invitation’s still open. And assuming I still want to accept it. I’m going for a lie down while you get unpacked.” I had some thinking to do.

An hour and a half later we were being shown to a table in Cafe Delancey, just off Camden High Street. My mood had marginally improved. Despite everything, it was lovely to be back together.

“Do you remember Colette?” I asked him, once the waiter had left us to look at the menus.

“Colette? The name rings a bell.”

“Colette Baca. She was a model back in the early days. Helped me put my portfolio together when I was setting up the studio.”

“Ah yes, I remember. Amazing cheekbones.”

I gave him a look.

“Yes. Anyway, I had a call yesterday. Her brother’s in a band and they asked if I’d be happy to do some pictures for them. It’s quiet at the moment so I said yes. Very happy to help.”

“That’s good.”

“They’re playing live tonight and we’ve been invited to go to see them, with a backstage pass, so we can go along after and meet them.”

“Excellent, sounds like fun. What sort of music?”

“Ah, well, here’s the thing. It’s just Steve the singer, that’s her brother, and two keyboard players. So, you’ll be able to talk synthesisers and samplers and relive the glory days of Flag Day.”

Danny looked embarrassed. He didn’t like talking about his youthful aspirations to be a pop star, and the band he’d played in at home in Sunderland, before moving to London to be a student. That said, I could tell he was interested.

“Where are they playing?”

“God knows. Somewhere in Covent Garden. I’ve got it all written down back at the flat.”

“Rock Garden?”

“That sounds like it. Anyway, are you up for it?”

“Definitely. Sounds good. What time?”

“Eight-ish I think. We can go for a drink first if you fancy it.”

“Perfect.” And then he gave me that look I find so adorable: crystal clear eyes beneath a floppy fringe. I had a moment of letting my imagination get the better of me but I still didn’t feel quite my usual self.

Maybe it was a premonition of the horror that was about to unfold.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'M not one to hold a grudge, normally. Actually, scratch that, maybe I am. I've never pretended to be perfect. And I certainly had a lingering resentment as far as Danny's old boss was concerned.

Now she'd annoyed me again, simply by not being as dead as she'd pretended, even though it was far from a surprise. Worse, though, I'd really been looking forward to a night out with Danny. I thought it would be fun and exciting, and a happy memory for the two of us. But the spectre of her reappearance hovered between us like a wasp at a summer picnic, and it was just so frustrating. I wanted the evening to be perfect. I really don't know why I bother sometimes. Maybe I shouldn't.

Still, it was brave face time. I didn't know much about the band apart from their name - Lumière Rouge - and obviously the identity of the singer. I knew there were two keyboard players, but had never heard any of their music. Colette described it as a kind of electro-goth crossover, which sounded vaguely terrifying. That said, I'd had a goth phase in my youth, albeit

mainly with fishnets and eyeshadow. My big, backcombed '80s hair rather confused the issue. I'm a natural brunette and never really felt the urge to go black, or indeed purple, which seemed de rigueur at the time.

I think Danny was quite shocked by my appearance when we left the flat. Normally I try to make an effort, but it just wasn't happening, so I went for a simple uniform of jeans, Dr Martens boots and a black shirt, albeit with darker lipstick than normal. In fairness, he was in much the same (sans lipstick), although the black leather Belstaff jacket was a nice touch. He'd pissed me off, but I still couldn't stop myself from fancying him, as irritating as that was given his recent behaviour.

We took the tube to Covent Garden, despite my misgivings about that particular form of transport. It may be a nascent claustrophobia and the fear of being stuck in a tunnel with all manner of strangers, but most likely it's just the thought of relinquishing control to someone who grew up wanting to be a train driver, but now settles for burrowing through subterranean London like some sort of high-speed, uniformed mole.

Once back in the open air we sailed to the front of the Rock Garden queue by simple virtue of being on the guest list. That cheered me up a touch, especially as the rain was pelting down. Inside, I looked for Colette but couldn't see her among the crush. Danny did his best to lighten the mood by providing a succession of drinks, bless him. They started to have the desired effect. And by the time Lumière Rouge took to the stage I was in the mood for dancing.

It didn't last long.

The first shock was the band itself. Maybe it's latent prejudice, but I'd imagined them all to be young men, dressed in black, looking moody and magnificent. But the two keyboard players were girls, and they both looked amazing. One had flowing auburn hair, the other a shorter blonde cut. Both were in theatrical, monochromatic outfits that they'd clearly worked

hard to prepare. That, in itself, should have perked me up because it would give me a lot to work with, photographically, but it was soon evident the men in the audience were fixated - Danny included. And stupidly I'd arranged for him to meet them afterwards. What is the point?

I remember being the centre of attention when I was a student, but now - as a supposed follower of fashion - I felt immediately and hopelessly underdressed.

The second shock was that they were actually bloody good, but the area in front of the stage became a heaving mass of bodies and I'm just too small for that kind of shenanigans. So, I moved back, towards the bar. Danny followed me.

"Are you okay?" he asked in the pause after the second song. I nodded.

"Are you sure?" he asked again. I just shrugged. But then the band started playing again, thumping out a chest-pounding drum track before the synthesisers cut in. I could feel Danny looking at me. He put his arm around me, but I didn't respond with my usual enthusiasm. I was beginning to think it was time to put my life in order. And that maybe I should have taken Ben from Harpers up on his offer while I had the chance.

Music, though, has a curious power to uplift, and as it continued I was genuinely impressed. I didn't know any of the songs but it really didn't matter. As they left the stage amid raucous calls for more, Danny tried again.

"What did you think?" he asked.

"Truthfully?" I asked. "They were amazing. What about you?"

"Fantastic," he said. But I didn't catch the rest of the sentence because a huge cheer announced the re-emergence of the band for the start of their encore.

When it was all over, and the crowd began to disperse, we moved to the front of the stage and I tried to attract the attention of one of the roadies, with minimal success. Thankfully I

caught a glimpse of Colette at the side of the stage and waved. She waved back and a moment later she was heading our way.

“What did you think?” she asked, once the obligatory hugs were dealt with.

“Really genuinely impressed,” I said, with Danny nodding beside me.

“Come on, I’ll take you through and introduce you.” She led the way, past a security man who looked like he could have crushed me by simply curling a finger.

Backstage was busy with various hangers-on drinking cans of beer and smoking. Steve was on a sofa looking particularly hot in more ways than one, his baggy white shirt drenched with sweat. Colette beckoned and he stood up to greet us. She did the introductions, telling him how impressed we’d been.

“So, you’re the photographer?” he asked in a slightly croaky voice. “I’ve heard exceptional things.”

“I try,” I said, with a smile, “but good models help.” I gave Colette a squeeze. Her own career had gone from strength to strength since we’d worked together all those years ago.

Colette looked at her watch.

“Sorry to leave the party early, but I’ve got to go,” she said. “I’ve been offered a lift. I’ll call you in the morning, okay?”

I nodded and we did the hug thing again. She left us with Steve. There was a momentary awkward pause, but then he filled it by offering to introduce us to the keyboard players. Obviously, I was hoping they’d be tongue-deep with their respective boyfriends, so that Danny got the off-limits message, but instead they were just together in an adjacent dressing room. Both had changed out of their stage attire and looked, frankly, a little bit spaced out.

“Holly, Leah, meet Anna, our new photographer,” said Steve. “And, er...”

“Danny,” said Danny. “I’m Anna’s friend.”

The girls shook hands but neither seemed particularly friendly, much to my relief. And yet stupidly I still managed to

cause myself unnecessary trauma.

“He’s a keyboard player too,” I said, and immediately regretted it. Danny looked a bit embarrassed.

“Ah, we’ll leave them to talk synthesisers,” Steve continued. “I’ve got a few ideas for the shoot to run past you. Can I get you a drink?”

“More the merrier,” I said. And then hastily added “Ideas” in case he thought I was some sort of alcoholic. But then I accepted a drink too, and next thing I knew I was being passed a cold can of Red Stripe lager. It’s not my usual but I’m not one to complain when on the receiving end of hospitality.

“Your voice sounds tired,” I said, raising the can.

“It is a bit. It was hard work out there.”

“I know. I saw. It seemed to go down well, though.”

“It did, thankfully. There were A&R people out there somewhere, so hopefully they were impressed, but it’s a lottery really.”

“How’s it all going?”

He paused for a moment. It looked as if he was unsure how to answer.

“It’s going okay. It’s just hard keeping the momentum, you know? Keeping everyone happy?”

“The audience?”

He frowned. He seemed on edge, as though something was bothering him, but it could have just been the comedown from the adrenaline-rush of being on stage.

“Well, them, yes, but band members too.” His eyes flicked to the girls. One - Holly I decided (my memory is appalling and I get easily confused after mixing my drinks) - was sitting back down, seemingly in a world of her own. I say sitting but it was more of a sprawl. She seemed completely out of it. Leah, I assume, by process of elimination, tried nudging her but just got a couple of fingers in return. Holly’s eyes remained firmly closed. Leah was talking to Danny, but even she seemed quite keen to get away. I heard words like “Jupiter 8”, “Emulator”

and “Prophet VS” but she kept looking past him and after a few minutes she came over to whisper something to Steve, and then disappeared. Up close she didn’t seem anywhere near as glamorous. Her skin betrayed what I suspected was a far-from-healthy lifestyle. Danny came back to join us. There was definitely an undercurrent of something, but I wasn’t quite sure what.

“So, the pictures?” I said once we’d watched this play out.

“Yes, sorry. Look, are you still on for tomorrow? Can we discuss it then? I’m going to have to shoot off and sort a few things.”

“Yes, of course. Is everything all right?”

He nodded, but it wasn’t convincing.

“Yeah, just the usual,” he said. “I’d better dash. Great to meet you though. Looking forward to tomorrow.”

We shook hands and then he left in the same direction as Leah. Holly remained on the sofa, largely motionless.

“Well, then,” I said to Danny, in the absence of anything more constructive. I shrugged.

“Should we get going?” he asked.

I nodded. I called out goodbye to Holly but didn’t get a response. Maybe she was just asleep. I don’t know. Danny linked arms and we headed outside to hail a taxi. I wasn’t sure what to make of it all.

“Mikołaj you old rascal, I don’t mind if I do.”

From behind his desk, the man gave a signal, and a moment later two glasses appeared in front of Graham March, followed closely by a bottle of Talisker single malt. A generous measure was poured in each.

“Thank you, Tomasz,” said Mikołaj in heavily accented English. “You can leave us now.”

As Tomasz turned, March couldn’t fail to see the shoulder

holster appear from under his jacket. Or the gun it contained.

“A toast, Mr March,” Mikołaj said once they were alone. “To new arrivals.”

March swallowed. It wasn’t his usual brand but it was good, tarnished only by the overriding taste of menace in every drop.

CHAPTER SIX

Sunday, April 3rd, 1994

DANNY was on the computer when I emerged from the shower. There was a packet of cigarettes on the desk beside him.

“Something you’re not telling me?” I asked, nodding in its general direction.

“Ah,” he said, looking even more shifty than he had yesterday.

I just raised my eyebrows.

“They’re Clare’s,” he said eventually, as though trying not to upset me, but failing.

“Uh-huh,” I responded, trying to affect nonchalance, but failing just as badly. I didn’t know what else to say, so decided against saying anything, and instead left to make a cup of tea. A moment later Danny followed me to the kitchen.

“What’s up?” he said. “You don’t seem yourself.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Cup of tea?”

“Anna?”

“What?”

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“What the matter is.”

“Nothing’s the matter.”

“Is it Clare?”

“No.”

“Right, so it’s Clare then.”

“God, you’re annoying.”

“Listen, I didn’t ask her to reappear. I didn’t ask her to help me. She just offered.”

“But you accepted.”

“Not in as many words.”

“Ha. And what does that mean, exactly?”

Danny sat down, looking distinctly uncomfortable, while I poured hot water into two mugs and started stirring the PG Tips tea bags. I was *this* close to seeing if I could find him a leftover Typhoo instead.

“It means what I said. I was just as shocked to see her as you’d have been.”

“Danny, if I’d seen her I’d have been calling the police or Interpol or at the very least hotel security.”

“It just wasn’t like that.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“But it’s bothering you. Why? I don’t trust her either but what harm can it do?”

I just looked at him, trying to believe my ears were in some way disconnected from my brain.

“What *harm*?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you being deliberately stupid or just trying to annoy me?”

“No, come on, tell me.”

“For fuck’s sake. The love of your life turns up when she

should be doing a life stretch for multiple murders. *Murders*, Danny. She's an art thief, a self-confessed fraud, and seems to lack any sense of moral judgement. And she wants to be your friend, and she's giving you hugs, and now she's going to wheedle her way back into your life on the pretext of helping you, which is just about as likely as me becoming the next Archbishop of Canterbury, or a fucking professional basketball player or something. And you're asking me if I can see anything possibly even slightly suspect?"

"It's not like that!"

"Well, it looks like that from here."

"For starters, she's not the love of my life."

"Ha."

"Think what you want. And secondly, I'm investigating some seriously bloody dangerous people, so anything that helps is more than welcome."

"You're as bad as she is."

"I'm not! Jesus. Listen to yourself."

"Somebody needs to."

"Oh, Anna. Do you want me to get killed?"

"No, obviously."

"That's a start. Well then. Look, it's a serious business. And if she knows something then I'd be stupid not to at least take her seriously."

"Oh, so now she's your guardian angel?"

Danny laughed. Which annoyed me.

"What's funny?"

"It's just that's exactly what she said."

"What?"

"That she was my guardian angel."

"I fucking give up. Make your own tea." And I stormed off in a not inconsiderable strop.

Ten minutes later there was a knock at my bedroom door. I ignored it.

"Can I come in?" he said.

I ignored that too. He came in anyway, and sat down next to me on the bed. At least he'd had the decency to bring the tea, which was just as well.

"It's getting cold," he said, gesturing to the mug. I felt like ignoring it on a point of principle, but I like tea, and principles take second priority at times.

"Anna," he said, when I still didn't respond. "Please let's not fall out."

I looked at him. He looked genuinely upset at the prospect. I felt my anger start to soften, which is weird because that should have just annoyed me even more.

"I just don't see how her turning up is anything other than trouble," I said eventually.

"No, I understand that. But trust me. I'll take anything she says with a pinch of salt."

"And now you're talking in clichés."

"This is serious! No, I don't trust her. But she knows people. She may help. She may be completely useless. I don't know. But everything is worth considering. Do you think March is playing by the rules?"

"No."

"Exactly. So yes, I take on board the warning, and I love that you care, but I have to listen to her. I'd be stupid not to."

I rubbed my eyes with both hands, wishing I'd tidied my room before his arrival, and took a sip of the tea to give myself thinking time.

"And the cigarettes?" I asked eventually.

"She left them on the table in the hotel."

"And you kept them as what? Some sort of souvenir?"

"No. Because she'd written me a message in the lid."

"That's romantic. What sort of message?"

"Will you give it up with the romance? You were the one out swapping numbers with non-gay Ben."

"Yeah, well I may just ring him. What sort of message?"

“Her email address.”

I sighed. Danny just looked at me. She was clever. I'd give her that. Too clever for her own good one day, perhaps.

“Okay,” I said, feeling the fight go out of me. “Just promise me you'll be careful.”

“I will.” It came out as little more than a whisper. And then we hugged. And then his mobile phone rang.

Danny rushed to the living room to answer the call, leaving me to ponder my life decisions, but not coming up with thoughts of any particular clarity. A couple of minutes later he reappeared, looking shocked.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“That was March,” he said. “He wants to meet.”

Danny left the flat about half an hour later. I told him to be careful, and he assured me he would be. They were meeting in a coffee shop near Mornington Crescent, in full view of the public. If there was any trouble there'd be plenty of witnesses. I wasn't happy but acknowledged he had no option but to go.

With the flat to myself, I had a call of my own to make. Not to Ben, although I was seriously tempted. Colette answered on the fourth ring.

“What's the deal with the girls?” I asked, after we'd said our hellos.

“In what way?”

“I don't know. There just seemed to be a bit of tension. And they looked a bit out of it. Are they okay?”

“How do you mean okay?”

“Just okay, okay. It was like they were spaced out. Excuse the lack of subtlety, but are they on drugs or something?”

I could hear Colette sigh.

“I don't know. Quite possibly. Why? What happened?”

I told her about Holly collapsing on the sofa and Leah

acting weird.

“Leah's a funny one,” Colette said after I'd finished. “Holly seems a bit posh. She's got a kind of public school background and definitely comes from money. I get the feeling she's only in the band as some sort of rebellious phase before settling down for a life in the country with a city boy.”

“I know the type.”

“Exactly. Leah, though... she's about as different as it gets. I think she was homeless. Maybe not sleeping rough as such, but living in a squat somewhere. How they all met each other I have no idea. I get the sense she's had it hard.”

“Are they your friends?”

“No, not particularly. I've only met them through Steve.”

“That's good. I'm not sure about them. Steve seems a lovely guy but they seem highly strung.”

“When are you doing the pictures?”

“This afternoon.”

“Best of luck then. See what you can find out. Let me know how it goes. Okay?”

“Shall do.”

“I'm out of the country for a week on a job, but we'll catch up when I get back. Call me.”

“I will. Have fun.”

We hung up. I thought again about calling Ben, but I had too much to do, preparing for the photo shoot. What would I say to him anyway? “Hi Ben, I know I said I wasn't interested as recently as thirty-six hours ago, but how about a night of passion just to get my own back on my flatmate who's a pain in the arse?” And besides, I couldn't help worrying about Danny. Of all the unfathomable things in the world, what exactly was March up to?

CHAPTER SEVEN

“DANNY, you’re looking well. Can I order you a tea or something? Earl Grey perhaps? You look the sort.”

Danny looked around the room, scanning for anyone who might be watching. Alert to danger. There were only three other customers. A couple seemingly in love, holding hands in the corner, and a mother with a pushchair near the counter. None looked particularly interested in the overweight man with the thinning grey hair, sitting on his own by the window.

“What’s this about?” asked Danny.

“Just a little chat with my old friend. Take a chair, please. The lovely waitress will be over in a moment.”

Danny sat down, against his better judgement. The last time he’d been opposite Graham March had been in an official police interview, during the hunt for Clare. It hadn’t been cordial.

“So, how’s life?”

“I’m doing well, Graham. Can I call you Graham? I gather titles are no longer appropriate.”

“Ah Danny, you’re a cheeky boy. It’s just temporary, I assure you. Just a little misunderstanding, caused in no small part by your good self, but don’t worry, I bear you no malice. I’m enjoying an extended paid holiday thanks to you. You’ve done me a favour.”

Danny looked at the man opposite. They hadn’t shaken hands.

“That wasn’t the intention. But again, the meeting?”

“You’re a bit eager. Patience, old boy. Your Uncle Graham has got a story for you.”

Danny laughed.

“You’re coming clean? Well that’s a turn-up. Excuse me while I start the tape machine.”

“Ah, not so fast. Make yourself comfortable. All in good time.”

The waitress arrived. Danny ordered a cappuccino, without sprinkles.

“How old are you now, Danny?” March continued. “Twenty? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Really? And yet still possessed of such youthful innocence. I’ve read some of your work.”

“You can read! Well done.”

March ignored the jibe.

“Some interesting theories. A rather tasty hatchet job on your former boss, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I’m not sure I’m interested in your opinion on anything.”

“Have you heard from Clare recently?”

“No.”

“You surprise me. Obviously we can agree the helicopter crash was a fake?”

Danny feigned a yawn.

“I’m not here to talk about Clare.”

“No, of course, but it’s interesting nonetheless. What I like to call a real-life mystery. The hunter becomes the hunted and

then goes all Lord Lucan on us.”

“Have *you* heard from her?”

“Me? Alas not, although she has my number if she’s in town and wants some excitement one evening. Even the enchanting Clare must have needs.”

Danny looked for a trace of a smile but March looked serious. If he wasn’t being ironic he was surely delusional.

“Listen, I’m sorry to curtail your daydream, Graham, but can you actually get to the point?”

“I’m building to that. And how is sweet little Anna. Are you two shagging yet or does she prefer them manlier?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“No, but the image makes me chuckle.”

The coffee arrived. Danny reached for his wallet but March passed the waitress a five pound note.

“My treat. All things considered.”

“Assuming it isn’t poisoned.”

“You could say thank you.”

“I could.”

Danny pulled the cup closer and scooped some of the froth with a teaspoon.

“One last question and then we’ll begin,” March continued. “Easter Bunny, Danny? Is that really the name you gave me?”

“One of many, but by far the least offensive.”

“Ah, very good. And the rationale?”

“Because of your name, March. That’s the Easter. And the Bunny because you were operating underground.”

“Oh.” March looked puzzled.

“What?”

“Ah, well, that is a disappointment.”

“A disappointment?”

“Yes. I was rather assuming it was something to do with my prowess with the ladies. You know? At it like a rabbit, if you catch my drift. How thoroughly unexciting. And talking of which, have you spoken to the delectable DC Amy Cranston

recently? Although I hear she’s a DS now. Very impressive. I really do miss her.”

“I’m sure it’s not mutual.”

March leaned forward and lowered his voice. Suddenly the mask of joviality slipped.

“Danny, I used to think you were an annoying little shit, but I appreciate I need to reassess that judgement, as you seem to have put a bit of weight on. You want to be careful with the pizzas. Get yourself to the gym perhaps, try to build some actual muscles. Either way, it’s time to give you the benefit of the doubt. I’m here to do you a favour.”

“A favour? From you?” Danny laughed, leaning back to put as much distance between them as possible.

“Well, I say a favour, but it’s a chance, mainly, for you to atone for your earlier misjudgements.”

“Right. And they are?”

“Don’t be coy, Danny. You know you’ve said some horrible things about me.”

“All of which were true.”

“In your warped tabloid opinion. But now you can write a new story and set the record straight.”

“The record’s already straight. The only bit missing is the part where you get sent away.”

“I’ll ignore your naivety.” March reached into his pocket for cigarettes, withdrew one and lit it, inhaling deeply.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” said Danny, making a show of wafting the smoke away.

“At last you make a salient point,” said March, putting his lighter back in his jacket pocket.

“Which is?”

“The things you don’t know about me. Specifically, viz, my charity work.”

“Your *what*?”

“Ooh, very good. That’s the spirit. The investigative journalist - and I use the term in its loosest sense - actually

asking a question. We'll make a man of you yet, Danny."

"Fuck off, Graham. Are we done? I've got better things to be doing on a Sunday." Danny started to stand up. March reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him back down. His grip was vicelike.

"You're forgetting the story, Danny. You'll want to hear this."

"I doubt it."

"Well, I'll summarise and try to speak very slowly. Make things easy for you. So, the next thing you don't know is that I'm volunteering at a homeless shelter. A leading light in the quest to provide safe accommodation for the disadvantaged, if you will."

"You're doing *what*?" Danny's question was part disbelief, part disdain.

"Exactly what I just said. And you get to write the story. Wrongly maligned senior police officer shows the caring side of humanity. It's good news for a change. Your readers will lap it up."

"Are you drunk?"

"I hesitate to acknowledge the insinuation."

"Well what the fuck are you on about? The only thing our readers are interested in, where you're concerned, is how long you're getting sent down for."

"So it's your job to change perceptions. I'm a decent man, Danny. Come with me and I'll give you an exclusive. And then, as a separate adjunct, I'll tell you about my work in the field of the arts. And not the kind of art your former boss used to nick, either."

Danny leaned forward, looking March straight in the eyes.

"I don't know what the fuck you're playing at, but play it with someone else, okay?" This time when he stood up March didn't try to stop him. Danny turned and left the building, heading out into the relentless rain without looking back.

The location for my photoshoot with Lumière Rouge was a derelict building close to Bromley-by-Bow tube station, which meant another trip on the loathsome Underground. I could have driven, and normally wouldn't have given it a second thought, but by the time I'd finished preparing my equipment I didn't have time to write a shot list or start sketching ideas, so I decided to take the train and do it on the way instead. It was a heavy-duty compromise for the sake of art.

Steve was there, with a bag over one shoulder, holding an umbrella, but there was no sign of the girls. We shook hands.

"So, what did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Quite straightforward, really. We just need a few publicity shots for gigs and labels. Apparently you're the best."

"According to Colette?"

Steve grinned.

"Of course."

"Well, she's got a point." I smiled back. "Do you have a stylist? Any requests from management or a record company?"

He shook his head.

"No, no stylist, sadly. And no manager either. It's just us. And we're still working on the record company thing but hopefully this will help."

"Fingers crossed. I'll do my best. Any sign of the others?"

"They're on their way, apparently." Steve sighed, as though this was a frequent occurrence. "Come on, we'll do a recce while we wait."

We edged through a broken gate, past a sign forbidding trespassers, and approached the main doors of the deserted building.

"Have we got permission for this?" I asked.

"Not exactly, but there's no security apparently. We'll be okay if we're careful."

I had my doubts. The doors had been kicked in, and unsuccessfully boarded up. I assumed it had once been an office block but now all the windows were smashed and nature

had taken its course. Weeds had taken hold in cracks in the concrete floor. There was a steady wind, carrying in rain and catching an almost overbearing stench of decay and urine. One corner showed evidence of a fire. Empty beer cans littered the floor, together with the occasional syringe and used condom. Not my idea of a romantic setting, but I'm a traditional girl at heart.

"How did you find this place?" I asked, trying to keep cheerful rather than betraying my sense of distaste. And wishing my sense of smell was less sensitive.

"Leah heard about it. We're going for the distressed look."

"You've achieved that. Is it safe?"

"Should be. Just be careful where you're walking."

I crossed to the window. Shattered glass lay on the floor, crunching under the soles of my DMs. Outside, the traffic was relentless. I shivered. The place was creepy. Suddenly I felt very aware of my own vulnerability. What if Steve was a maniac and was here to murder me? What chance would I have? Nobody would hear my screams. I started to feel increasingly uncomfortable.

"What do you think?" he asked, moving towards me. My grip tightened on my camera bag. I wished I'd brought a tripod. I've used one of those as a weapon before.

But before I had a chance to answer, I saw movement from over his shoulder. The one I thought was Holly was making her way towards us. I visibly relaxed.

"Hi," I called, with perhaps disproportionate jollity. "Come and join us."

Holly didn't look happy, but at least she was upright and, best of all, she was here.

"What the fuck is this place?" she asked. A hello would have been nice.

Steve moved over towards her and they walked off together, talking in hushed voices, leaving me alone. I felt isolated. I didn't expect to suddenly be treated like one of the band,

but I had no more idea about the underlying tensions than the previous night. The irritation was just taking hold when Leah arrived. At least I assumed it was Leah. It was hard to tell behind the sunglasses. She came towards me, stumbled over a broken pipe, and swore.

"All right?" I asked.

"Yeah, fine," she said. Thankfully their musicianship was infinitely better than their conversation.

After a minute or so of uncomfortable silence, apart from the wind and traffic, Steve and Holly returned. Steve took control. I was grateful. He directed us all to a space on the far side of the building where the light was casting interesting shadows on what was left of an interior wall. He took a can of spray paint from his shoulder bag and started work, writing the band's name on the wall. In some ways, I was quite impressed. It was wanton vandalism, certainly, but hardly likely to lower the tone of the place. And I admired the sense of daring. I just couldn't wait to get out of there.

Leah hardly spoke a word throughout the entire session, but she seemed happy to pose as I directed. I made use of the available natural light and then tried some with a flash, bouncing it off broken ceiling tiles. After the group shots in various combinations I did more of the girls together, and then each of them on their own. Despite everything, I started to almost enjoy myself. I always find photography therapeutic and I love a creative challenge. We tried some other places within the building, and I did some artistic stuff, playing with shallow depths of field and then slow shutter speeds with the traffic behind, blurring it into the background.

After about an hour and a half it was getting dark, I was cold and I was running out of film. Thankfully Steve called a halt.

"That should do," he said. "How are they looking?"

"Decent, I think. There's definitely something there."

"Excellent."

Leah came to stand beside him, but Holly wandered off on

her own. It was like the girls couldn't bear to speak to each other. I didn't have much optimism for their future together, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

"Listen, I was going to suggest going to the pub to celebrate, but I think we're going to have to run," he said. "Sorry." He looked genuinely concerned.

"That's okay," I replied. It was a shame. It would have been nice to chat to them, but in other ways I was relieved. I just wanted to get home and get warm. And have a shower.

"How long will it take to process the films?"

"Not long. I'll crack on with it first thing tomorrow."

"Brilliant. Do you want to pop by the rehearsal studio tomorrow afternoon, maybe two-ish, if that's not too early? I can't wait to see them. And we're playing live again tomorrow night if you fancy coming again."

I agreed, said I'd love to, and offered to attempt some live shots. As I was packing my camera away, Holly came over. It seemed completely out of character.

"Can I have a word?" she asked, as though talking to a stranger, rather than someone she'd been working with for the last couple of hours.

"Of course," I said. "What's up?"

She seemed hesitant.

"I just wanted to say thanks. For coming."

I was taken aback.

"That's okay," I said. "It was fun."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "It wasn't. Not really. But that's not your fault. You did a great job. Let me give you my number." She asked for a pen. I took one out of my camera bag and she wrote it on the side of one of the film boxes.

"It was great to meet you," she said. Suddenly her face conveyed a warmth that I'd never seen before. It was all very odd. I was tempted to get the camera out again, but there was no time. Steve led the way out of the building, back through the broken gate and onto the street outside. I assumed we'd all

get the tube back to somewhere together, but instead they said their farewells. I was left to walk to the station on my own.

It was the last time I'd see all three of them alive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GRAHAM March took the rear exit from Green Park Underground station, emerging onto Stratton Street, close to Langan's Brasserie. Evening service was just beginning, but despite the culinary temptations, he walked past, heading towards the Albermarle Casino and Gentleman's Club, just off Berkeley Square.

If everything went well, he would endeavour to find a pretty hostess in whom to indulge for a couple of hours, but first there was some business to resolve.

He nodded to the doorman who stood aside so he could enter the marbled foyer. A golden chandelier gave a low, seductive light.

"Good evening, Mr March, wonderful to see you again," said the receptionist from behind the security of her desk. The faked sincerity was almost believable.

"Good evening, my darling," he replied. "Just a quick word with Jacqueline if I may?"

"Of course. I'll just check that she's in."

Of course she was in. She was always in. Where else would she be? But it still paid to employ a gatekeeper.

The receptionist picked up the phone and dialled an internal number. A moment later she turned back to March.

"She's ready for you," she said. "You know the way."

"Thank you, my dear," he said. He unbuttoned his overcoat and headed through the gilt-laden double doors.

"So?" asked Jacqueline, once the drinks were poured. "What's new with Mikołaj?"

"It's all very interesting, my dear."

"Meaning?"

"He's an intriguing young man. Speaks very highly of you, by the way. We had quite the chat about you. It seems he'd like to take you to dinner."

"Well that's not going to happen."

"Really? He was most insistent."

"My involvement is strictly via you. As far as he's concerned I don't need to exist any more. I can't be anywhere near this."

"Of course."

"As long as that's understood."

Understood but highly inconvenient.

"Naturally, Jacqui. On the plus side, he confirmed the imminent shipment, although I wish he wouldn't use that word. I find it slightly dehumanising."

"Christ. First the homeless, now this. You do make me laugh. You're all heart, Graham. I didn't think you had it in you."

"I'm a decent man."

"And I'm the fucking Princess of Wales."

They paused to drink. Jacqueline lit a cigarette, offered one to March, but he declined.

"I'm still off them," he said.

"Good for you."

"Telling you, you're in the company of a new man."

“And I don’t believe a word of it. Did he give an actual ETA?”
“Not an exact date, no. I suspect the logistics are complicated, but early next week from what I can tell.”
“Good. Did he confirm how many?”
“Anywhere between twelve and twenty.”
“Useful. And I can rely on you?”
“I’m shocked you need to ask.”
“I’m equally shocked you expect me not to.”
“Haha. We know each other too well.”
“Okay. Well, I’ll still want first look when they get here. See if I can make use of any. And then we can sort things. Okay?”
“Excellent plan.”

Twenty minutes later March was heading back towards Green Park. He stepped off the kerb and nearly collided with a cyclist, who swore. He didn’t apologise. His mind was elsewhere. He had a keen instinct for self-preservation and could sense trouble ahead.

It hadn’t been the time to start befriending a hostess, under the watchful gaze of the casino staff, but instead of entering the Underground station, he continued and turned right on Piccadilly. He’d just pay a quick visit to Shepherd Market and see if he could maybe find a nice French girl for half an hour or so. It would be a much-needed distraction. And then he could decide how best to get out of this alive.

Back at the casino, Jacqueline addressed the two men in front of her.

“Every fucking thing he does and every fucking where he goes. Okay?”

The taller of the two nodded.

“Good. We’re done. Start tomorrow and keep me informed. I want to know everyone the bastard speaks to, what he has for lunch, every time he takes a piss. I do not trust the twat. Start

from there and work back.”

“Understood.”

“No excuses, Finn. I don’t need to explain why. Concentrate on him. And Logan?”

The other looked up.

“Like we said, make sure you stick close to every other fucker he may be speaking to. Is that all clear?”

“Yes, boss,” said Finn. Logan nodded.

“Right, you can go. The pair of you.”

They both turned without a word and left the room. Jacqueline finished her drink and switched off her computer. She’d go out for dinner and then decide exactly what to do with March when this was all over.

After a weekend in his Hampshire constituency, opening a fete and discussing the minutiae of Government policy with ill-informed constituents who clearly had no idea of the real issues facing a man of his standing, Samuel Elmhirst-Banks was pleased to return to the sanctuary and privacy of his Barbican flat. Working in Government offered perks and privilege, but having to shake hands and feign interest with those who elected him was a significant and perennial irritation.

He’d just poured a restorative glass of Argentinian Malbec when the phone started ringing. He sighed. It was rarely good news at this time of the evening. The Chief Whip and the spin doctors didn’t respect the convention of the working day.

He moved through to the living room and picked up the handset.

“Seb,” he said, using his initials as a short-form of his name.

“Hi,” she replied. He immediately relaxed at the sound of the familiar female voice, but then stiffened again as his mind switched back to the March conundrum. The man was a liability. The situation needed to be controlled.

“I’m glad it’s you,” he continued. “How’s it going? Anything to report?”

“It’s not exactly trouble-free but there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Do I want to hear this?”

“Probably not.”

“Jesus. Spare me then. Just the basics.”

“Okay. Don’t panic, but we’ve had a couple of complications on the domestic side of things. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“For God’s sake. Is it bad?”

“No, I’m dealing with it.”

“How bad?”

“Honestly, don’t worry. Bad, but not too bad. I’m sorting it.”

He paused, giving himself a moment to think, but then decided to trust his instincts.

“Good. I trust you. Any more movements?”

“He’s been back to the parlour and the casino. Just the regular pattern, nothing out of the ordinary. I’ve got a plan, though. You’ll absolutely love this.”

CHAPTER NINE

IT amazes me that a city the size of London, with nearly seven million inhabitants, can sometimes seem so small. I don’t take the Underground particularly regularly (may have mentioned it), but I was once on a train that was pulling into Edgware Road station when I looked up and saw two people from my school in Manchester, standing on the platform. How did that happen? I jumped off the train immediately and greeted them like long-lost friends until reality struck and I remembered that I didn’t have much in common with either of them, and would probably never see them again.

A similar thing happened on the journey back from Bromley-by-Bow. It’s an open-air station. I walked to the back of the platform in order to improve my chances of getting a seat, and waited in the cold for the train to arrive. The rain had reduced to a light drizzle so it was just about bearable, although it was doing nothing for my hair. There was only one other passenger on my end of the platform. He was about my age, mid-twenties, and seemed well-dressed despite an otherwise

slightly rugged appearance. I was particularly impressed by his scarf, which was an almost perfect match for his blue eyes, and tied in a casual European loop. Not that I'm in the habit of making eye contact with strangers, but he'd looked up as I approached, just before his mobile phone started ringing. He answered the call, but had to end it quickly as the train approached. I didn't take in what he said.

We both got on to the same carriage, and sat on opposite sides, about five seats apart. I didn't have anything to read so tried to collect my thoughts about Danny and Clare, and then the photo shoot and the band. A couple of times I looked up. Scarf man was reading a novel. I tried to make out the title for the sake of something to do. And then he looked up, and caught me, so I quickly averted my eyes, as you do, and may have even blushed a bit.

Eventually the train pulled in to Mile End. I had the option of changing there, but instead decided to stay on and swap to the Northern Line at Moorgate. Scarf man stood up and made his way to the doors, and left the train as soon as they opened. I watched him walk down the platform but then returned to my private world.

I'd been so happy on Friday, laughing and drinking with Katie and Ben. It had all seemed so natural, so easy, so uncomplicated. Colleagues of sorts, having a good time, swapping industry gossip. But now my mood was considerably darker. I wasn't sure quite why I felt so irritated about Clare's reappearance, but just the mention of her name seemed to play havoc with my blood pressure. And I'm normally such a nice, placid person.

I started having thoughts that would have seemed surreal just two days ago. Maybe I had been too hasty with Ben. My feelings for Danny run deep, but it's complicated by the intensity of our friendship. Realistically if we were ever going to get together it would have happened by now, but maybe we just know each other too well. I'm historically useless at

relationships, and no matter how much I dream of hearts and flowers, the risk of ruining what we already have always holds me back. On occasions, I get the sense that he feels the same, but we've reached a kind of easy familiarity in which such issues never really get discussed.

Eventually the train pulled in to Moorgate. I got off and made my way to the northbound Northern Line. I moved to the end of the platform again. After an eight-minute wait the train arrived. The carriage was busy, and it was standing room only, although a lot of people got off at Kings Cross and I was able to get a seat for the last few stops. And that's when I noticed scarf man again, at the far end of the carriage, still reading his book.

That puzzled me. How had he done that? I tried not to keep looking but I was finding myself intrigued. He didn't seem to notice me, though, so I tried to think of something else.

A few minutes later, the train pulled into Camden Town and I stood up to get off. I gave him one last glance, but he seemed oblivious. That was probably a good thing. He was still reading.

I got off the train and walked through the station, wishing my bag was slightly less heavy. Eventually I caught the escalator to the ground level, then turned left to get the bus up to Rochester Square and home. And that, I thought, was that.

About half an hour later, I made a decision. I called Ben. What harm could it do? Sadly, however, there was no answer until the voicemail kicked in. I didn't know what message to leave, so I disconnected the call, partly frustrated and partly relieved. In one sense it felt like some great infidelity, but an increasing part of me had decided it was entirely justifiable. At the very least we could have a nice glass of wine, or several, and we could discuss editors and clients and all the sort of fashion industry nonsense that I normally try to avoid, but really should probably pay more attention to.

Danny wasn't home and I was feeling restless. I thought about heading up to my studio to process the films, but I was tired and felt in need of a shower and a lie down. I popped the kettle on but then remembered that we'd used the last of the milk that morning. So, reluctantly, I put my jacket on, and popped out of the flat to get some from the petrol station on Camden Road (and some biscuits, I won't lie).

As I was queuing up to pay, I heard the door open behind me. I paid and took my change, and turned to leave, only to see scarf man walking towards the chiller cabinet at the back of the shop. I did one of those double take things, just as he turned around and caught me looking at him again.

There was a momentary look of puzzlement and then he started to smile.

"Are you following me?" he said.

It was one of those scenes you play back in your mind with all sorts of witty responses, but in the heat of the moment I could only manage a "What? No. Sorry."

And then I thought, hold on, I was in the shop first, so I was very much not following anyone. I pointed that out.

"Valid point," he said. "Although you did follow me onto the platform at Bromley-by-Bow."

"No, I didn't. You just happened to be there when I arrived. That's different."

"Okay, but you were looking at me on the train."

"Don't flatter yourself. I was trying to see the title of your book."

"My book?"

"Yes."

"Right."

"It looked familiar and I was bored, all right?"

"If you insist." He started laughing. Normally that would have annoyed me but actually I didn't mind. I could see the funny side.

"So, what was it?"

"My book?"

I nodded.

"The Shipping News."

"Ah, okay. I've heard of that. Is it good?"

"I think so." He looked down. "Anyway, I should leave you to your, um, biscuits."

I followed his eyes to the packet of overpriced chocolate digestives and suddenly felt guilty. I hoped my choice of comfort food didn't scream desperation.

"Yes, well, thank you. Nice meeting you. Again."

"My pleasure. See you soon." It was said with a genuine smile and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Not if I see you first," I said, but didn't mean it. I was just leaving the shop when he called after me.

"So, what were you doing in Bromley-by-Bow?"

I stopped, letting the door close on its own.

"Taking pictures. And you?" He took his change from the shop assistant.

"I was at 3 Mills."

"3 Mills? Should I know that?"

"Possibly. I don't know. It's a film studio."

"Ah, very impressive. So, you're what? A film star?"

"I wish. No, just the odd bit of acting but nothing you'd have heard of. Not yet, anyway."

That was my next question answered.

"What's your name? I'll look out for you."

"Mitch Hennessey. And you are?"

"Anna. Anna Burgin."

"Pleased to meet you then, Anna Anna Burgin, so good they named her twice," he said, offering me a handshake. I accepted. His hand was warm and the grip firm, but not overly so.

"You can let go now," I said, but part of me didn't mean that either. What was happening to me? First the thoughts of Ben, and now this. Maybe it was my subconscious deciding it was definitely time to move on. Or at least definitely show Danny

what he was risking.

"I don't suppose..." he started, then paused. "No, sorry, I shouldn't."

"Shouldn't what?"

"I was just going to say, if you're so intent on stalking me, maybe you could fancy going for a drink some time?"

"Ah," I said.

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't apologise. I'm flattered."

"Really? So you would?"

"I didn't say that. Just I was flattered to be asked. And just to reiterate, I'm not a stalker."

He laughed.

"Ah okay. Sorry. I was getting carried away. Boyfriend?"

"It's complicated."

"Understood."

"Nice meeting you, though." I turned to leave.

"Let me give you my number," he said. "Just, you know, in case it gets any, er, less complicated."

I turned back. I *was* flattered. I liked him. God.

"Okay," I said.

He took a card from his wallet. It said Mitch Hennessey, screen actor, and had a mobile number below.

"Very impressive," I said.

"Call me," he said. "Any time. And I'll lend you the book when I've finished."

"Okay," I smiled. "I may just do that."

I didn't give him my mobile number in return, not least because I can never remember it. But this time, I really did leave the shop, and headed home with slightly more of a spring in my step. There was suddenly even more to think about, but the possibilities were intriguing.

Samuel Elmhirst-Banks looked at the clock. It was nearly ten. Maybe too late? It was worth a try. He dialled a number. It was answered on the third ring.

"DS Cranston."

"Amy! How are you? It's Seb."

"Seb. Hi. What's up?"

"Just a quick call. Is it a good time?"

He doubted there ever a good time for an unsolicited call from a politician, but he'd met DS Cranston several times in the course of his Home Office duties and they knew each other well.

"It's fine. I was just running a bath. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing urgent. I need to talk to you about a friend of yours."

"Of mine?"

He laughed.

"Okay, not a friend. Graham March."

"Oh God. What's he done now?"

"That's what I need to talk to you about."

"And?"

"He seems to be putting himself about a bit."

"Hold on, let me just turn the taps off."

He refilled his glass while he waited for her to return. One more wouldn't hurt, although it was looking like a busy day tomorrow. There was never a quiet one in Government, just seemingly endless firefighting, committee meetings, and covering of tracks. Talking of which...

"I'm back," she said after a moment.

"I do apologise. This won't take long."

"Do I need to take notes?"

"No, you're okay. It's off the record at the moment. It's just, well... Delicate."

"How come?"

"It's just March. How's the investigation going?"

"You know I can't tell you that. It's an internal enquiry. I'm

not involved except as a witness, but even if I was, I wouldn't be able to discuss it. You know that."

"I do. Of course. But I don't need to tell you the sensitivity of the situation. Can I be frank with you?"

"Of course."

"Okay. Look, I probably shouldn't say this but I'm being leaned on, if you know what I mean. You've seen the papers, I assume?"

"Which ones?"

"All of them, just about. Conspiracy theories about corruption seem very much in vogue."

"I've noticed."

"Exactly. And those above seem to expect me to - how can I put this - keep a lid on things, if you catch my drift. Anything new could be *very* bad PR, and we can't have that, especially at the moment."

"Sorry to hear that, but he's suspended while the investigation continues. There's nothing more I can tell you."

"I know. And I'm sure it'll be very thorough."

"It will. It is."

"Of course."

It was time for a different approach.

"Are you keeping an eye on him in the meantime?" he asked.

"Not personally, no."

"Is that not within your remit?"

"Not really. Why? What's bothering you?"

"I'm just concerned, Amy. The rottweilers are circling and they don't need any encouragement. Who's the guy who broke the original story? Danny someone. You know him?"

"Danny Churchill. Yes, I know him."

"What do you make of him?"

"He's straight up. Thorough but decent."

"Is he still on the story?"

"I don't know, but probably."

"But you haven't heard anything?"

"No."

"Okay. But listen, Amy, could you do me a favour? If you hear anything about it, or about anything that March is up to, can you let me know? Within the realms of whatever you can do without breaking any rules, of course. I need to make sure it doesn't get any worse. I could do with knowing what he's up to."

"Okay," she said. "Just don't pin your hopes on it."

"I won't."

They ended the call. DS Amy Cranston returned to her bath. Seb took his glass through to the kitchen. There was progress of sorts, but he still felt uneasy. Maybe it was time to start thinking about insurance.

CHAPTER TEN

Monday, April 4th, 1994

“MORNING stranger. How was Germany?” Derek Hughes, one of the Daily Echo’s longest-serving sub-editors, looked up from his desk as Danny walked across the open-plan newsroom, towards his corner office.

“Cold,” said Danny, pausing momentarily. “Good, though. How are things here?”

“Ah, just the usual. Mike’s on the warpath.”

“Again? God.”

“Definitely in your interest to pop your head in. Word to the wise.”

“Cheers, Derek. Shall do.” It was good to have someone looking out for you, especially when deadlines were being missed.

With a deep breath, Danny crossed to Mike Walker’s office. His editor had been supportive since Danny had taken over

as the head of the Special Investigations Department, but his mood could fluctuate in a heartbeat. He handled stress by sharing it equally among his staff, with added venom when a front page was at stake. Danny knocked on the open door. Walker looked up from the newspaper he was reading.

“Danny, come in,” he said. A seat wasn’t offered. It never took long enough to get comfortable.

“Did you want to see me?”

“No, I didn’t want to see you. I wanted to see your fucking copy.”

“I’m working on it, Mike.”

“What the exact fuck use is that? Shall I call the press hall? Tell them not to bother today because the golden boy’s been fucking off round Europe on a jolly? And then call accounts and ask them to express your expenses because you’re skint after running up a massive fucking bill trying to find whatever the German equivalent of a wild goose is?”

“No, I’m sorry. But it’s taking time.”

“To do what? March is as guilty as the fucking Kray twins. How much more time do you need?”

“Is that rhetorical?”

“What?”

“Just asking.”

“No, go on. How much longer?”

“It’s hard to tell.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Walker shut the newspaper and threw it on his desk. “What’s the delay?”

Danny closed the door without asking.

“I’m going to have to ask you to trust me on this.”

“Go on.”

“It’s getting bigger. I had a hunch he wasn’t spending his suspension looking after the garden, so I started looking deeper.”

“And?”

“It seems like he’s got some very naughty friends from

eastern Europe.”

“Can you get to the point?”

“Yes, sorry. Okay, he seems to be getting involved in people trafficking. Sex trafficking to be exact.”

“Jesus.”

“Exactly. He’s working with a guy from Poland but there’s a network. And then yesterday I found out he’s got an involvement in a homeless shelter.”

“A *what?*”

“Exactly. Says it’s his charitable side, putting the world to rights, but does that sound feasible? I don’t think so.”

“So, what are you thinking?” Walker’s tone was softening. He could recognise a story.

“That he’s using the shelter as some form of a front. Either taking girls from there and passing them into his network, or somehow using that to bring them over here from Poland, Bulgaria, wherever. Either way it needs looking into.”

“The filthy bastard. So why did you go to Germany?”

“The girls come from the old Eastern Bloc but they get funnelled through Cologne before ending up here. I’m getting close but it’s hard to pin anything on him. There’s definitely something in it, though. There’s talk of a group of girls coming over this week, or if not, soon after. I want to follow him, see what he’s up to. See if I can establish a link then bang. We’ve got him.”

“Jesus. Legal’s going to have a field day with this. Okay. Do you need any help? Photographer?”

“I’m all right at the moment but I’ll let you know.”

Walker sat back in his chair, thinking.

“How did you hear about the homeless shelter?”

“He told me himself.”

“What?”

“He rang, asked to meet me. I met him yesterday. Wants me to run it as some sort of good news story to help clear his name.”

“Well, that’s a lot of bollocks. He must know you’re getting close, though. He’s trying to cover his tracks, or lead you up an alley.”

“Possibly literally.”

“Exactly. Be careful, Danny.”

Walker stood up, came around his desk, and patted Danny on the shoulder.

“Good work. Keep me informed, okay? And on my desk by the end of the week.”

“What? The whole thing?”

“Got a problem with that?”

“I don’t know, I... It depends how it goes this week.”

“You’re playing with the big boys now, Danny. The longer you take, the more chance of a leak or the more chance he’ll get away with it. I’ll give you to the end of the week, then I want him on his sword. Okay?”

It wasn’t a question so much as a statement. Danny nodded and left the room.

There were still two desks in the Special Investigations Department. Clare’s was now covered in books, newspapers, magazines and clutter but there was an order to everything, below the superficial appearance of chaos. Her Atex terminal had been removed. Danny had thoughts of hiring an assistant of his own, but as yet hadn’t had the budget approval. In any case he was doing very well on his own, with occasional support from elsewhere within the editorial department. Clare’s nameplate had also been removed from the door. It was like she’d never existed.

There were two phones on his desk - the black one for calls through the switchboard and a red one that served as a direct line for those to whom he’d given his number. Danny picked up the black one and started dialling.

“DS Cranston,” said a voice, as the call was answered.

“Hi Amy, it’s Danny. Good time to call?”

“Possibly excellent as it happens. How are you doing, Danny?”

He’d met Detective Sergeant Amy Cranston during the search for Clare. Despite him being a suspect in the disappearance, and being on the receiving end of several police interviews, Danny found that he could trust her. She was straight, and had believed in him when her former boss, DCI Graham March, was trying to accuse him of murder. They got on well. They both wanted to see March pay for his corruption. For Amy, it was a question of pride in the police service to which she’d devoted her career.

They made small talk for a couple of minutes and then Danny got to the point.

“Can I talk to you off the record? About March?”

“Of course, although he seems to be the flavour of the month at the moment. Were your ears burning last night, by the way?”

“Mine? No. Why?”

“Nothing to worry about. I just had a call about you.”

“Me? Who from?” Danny was immediately on alert.

“A guy called Samuel Elmhirst-Banks. Calls himself Seb for short. Have you heard of him?”

“He’s a politician, isn’t he? Home Office or something?”

“That’s the one. Junior minister.”

“Why was he interested in me?”

“He wasn’t originally. He called to discuss March. He seems absolutely paranoid about bad PR for the Met. I got the impression he’d rather we brushed it all under the carpet than bring March to justice and face a media backlash. Which is where you came in. He asked if you were still pursuing him.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t know but it was possible.”

“Well done.”

“I’m telling you, I don’t owe politicians any favours. All I’m interested in is the truth and justice. I don’t appreciate being leaned on, especially by some Tory twat, if you pardon the language.”

Danny chuckled.

“I know what you mean.”

“Anyway, how can I help?”

“It’s delicate. I just wanted to bring you up to speed on a couple of things I’m working on, and see if you’d heard anything. Obviously, discretion is paramount.”

“Of course.”

“Have you heard about this homeless shelter thing?”

“Ha. Yes. I suspect we both have our suspicions, though, and similar opinions about leopards and spots.”

“Exactly. Listen, are you doing anything tonight? Could we meet? It’s not really something for a phone call.”

“Not tonight, sorry. I’m working late. Tomorrow lunchtime, though, if it can wait?”

Danny gave a thought to his deadline. That could still work.

“That’s perfect. I’ll keep digging. In the meantime, if you hear anything can you let me know?”

“You as well. Okay Danny. I can’t promise. I can’t reveal details of ongoing enquiries.”

“Understood. Just grapevine though? Unofficial?”

“Leave it with me.”

They said their farewells and Danny turned to his terminal. He started looking on the wire for stories about people trafficking. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain it seemed that business was booming. It was a depressingly familiar story. And it was already evident this was potentially his most dangerous investigation so far.

I thought about trying Ben again, but then remembered the

way Mitch had smiled at me and decided against it, for now. It was weird. Normally I keep myself to myself, but suddenly I was spoiled for choice.

That said, I decided not to call Mitch either. There were two main reasons. Despite the obvious appeal of an uncomplicated relationship with somebody new, unencumbered by the expectations of friendship or work issues, my heart still very much belonged to Danny. I'd had offers before. In fact, we'd both been on dates before. I went out with an anaesthetist once but it was really boring. He sent me to sleep. Ultimately, though, Danny and I seem to have a connection that goes beyond anything I've ever known, and I just can't imagine that with anyone else.

The second reason? Danny was still very much on the naughty step, and if he had anything at all to do with Clare, ever again, I'd be quite prepared to rethink all of the above and frankly he could go and stuff himself, devotion or not. I was that pissed off. And in that eventuality, it would pay to keep Mitch waiting, to make him even more grateful and even more keen to see me when I finally picked up the phone.

So, either way, a call was out, but I made sure Mitch's business card was in a safe place on my desk at Passion Fruit - my photographic studio. I can't deny that I occasionally cast a glance in its direction, pondering the possibilities. And it would be a fib to deny that I'd copied his number into my phone memory already, just for safekeeping. Where was the harm in that? Part of me was flattered. But a further part of me seemed to be curiously smitten. And that part was nudging me in the direction of recklessness.

I developed the films from the previous day, made contact sheets of the lot, and quick 10x8 enlargements of a few of my favourites. I hung them up to dry then made sure of it with my hairdryer. It's never ideal as the heat can mess with the resin coating of the paper, but better than having them stick together. Once that was done, it was time to head to the

rehearsal studio in Hackney.

I didn't fancy public transport - even though it was an overground train from Camden Road rather than the tube - so I took my Honda Prelude and arrived exactly on time, if you use a fairly loose definition of the term "exactly" and allow a fifteen-minute margin on top.

I pressed the button for the doorbell. It was a fairly bleak-looking place, in a side street, near a parade of shops. I tried to listen for music as I waited for the bell to be answered, but I could just hear traffic, and a passing train.

After a moment, the door buzzed and seemed to become unlocked. I pushed it and it gave way. I found myself in a musty hallway with a set of stairs at the end leading down to a cellar that presumably served as the rehearsal space.

"Hi," I called, but there was no answer. I made my way to the stairs and just as I reached the top, a door opened below. Holly appeared.

"Hi, Anna, good to see you," she said. "Come on down."

She held the door open for me at the bottom of the stairs. I found myself in a room with several sets of big speakers, several flight cases, a couple of keyboards on stands, a desk with an old-looking computer, and a microphone in the middle. There was a sofa against one wall, and the walls themselves were painted black but decorated with newspaper cuttings, all sorts of foam shapes that were presumably for sound reasons, and the occasional picture. There was a mustiness about the place, coupled with the distinctive aroma of marijuana. Curiously, nobody was there apart from Holly.

"Are the others not here?" I asked after she'd offered to make me a cup of tea. She seemed on reasonable form, although she still had a slightly spaced-out look, as though she'd taken something earlier in the day.

"No, sorry," she replied. "I'm not sure what they're up to. They were supposed to be here but I've not heard anything from them."

"That's a shame. I've brought some pictures."

She seemed enthusiastic to see them. Far more enthusiastic than she'd been to have them taken, anyway. I laid them out on top of one of the keyboards. It said Roland on the front and had an array of knobs and nice coloured switches. Danny would have recognised it, I'm sure.

"Wow, I love them," said Holly, as she examined the contact prints. She pointed out her favourites. It was good to have feedback but I was a bit miffed the others weren't there to see them as well. We chatted for a while, although she seemed reluctant to talk about the band. On the upside, she was considerably friendlier than I'd expected. Maybe she just took time to get to know someone before opening up, and there's nothing wrong with that.

"We're playing again tonight if you're interested in coming down," she said, eventually.

"Yes, Steve said. Definitely."

"The others can see the pictures then. Sorry again they're not here. They should be. We're supposed to be rehearsing." She wrote the venue details on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

"I said to Steve I'd attempt some live shots, if I don't get crushed."

"Wow, yes, that would be amazing. Are you sure?"

"Of course." I remembered a night in a night club, elbowing my way through the crowds, taking pictures. The bruises lasted a few days but it had been lots of fun, and the challenge of capturing the energy and mood of the performance intrigued me.

"Thanks, Anna," she said. There was the merest hint of a wobble in her voice.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. It was worth a go.

"In terms of?"

"You know, with the band. I thought there seemed a bit of tension."

Her expression changed. I couldn't work out if it was annoyance or a warning in her eyes.

"We're fine," she said. That was it.

"Okay," I said, in the absence of anything more constructive.

"Right," she continued. "I'd better get on. There's some programming to do even if nothing else."

"Of course. I'll leave you to it. Keep the pictures and show the others and I'll chat about them tonight." I moved towards the staircase. She opened the door again.

"Press the buzzer by the door upstairs and it'll open," she said. There was a definite sense of being rushed out. But then, as I started climbing the stairs, she spoke after me.

"We just work hard, you know?"

I turned.

"Sorry?"

"We work hard. It's a creative business. Of course, there's tension occasionally. Don't worry, Anna."

I walked back towards her. I still couldn't read her eyes but there was definitely something there.

"Are you okay?" I asked with genuine tenderness.

She nodded. I stepped forward, arms extended. She seemed in need of a hug.

"Call me any time you need me, or if you just want to talk," I said.

"I will." She smiled, but it was the sort of smile that hid a hundred secrets. I made my way back to the door. She stayed, leaning on the door frame, as I ascended the stairs.

"Thanks again," she said as I reached the top. I wasn't sure what she was thanking me for: just the pictures or the olive branch of friendship. Either way, I left her there alone. There's often something self-destructive about creative genius. It was bothering me for reasons I couldn't explain, let alone begin to understand.

Want to know what happens next?

Order the full version of Out Of The Red at Amazon in
Kindle or print versions.

Or, get a signed first edition print version at no extra cost
direct from:

www.davidbradwell.com

Thank you for reading!