

Everything secret degenerates.

Lord Acton

ONE

He was trying to get a moment's peace when the car appeared. Monday 10 June, end of a hot day. The city had started drinking at lunchtime and by 3 or 4 p.m. crime seemed the only appropriate response to the beauty of the afternoon. Belsey's shift had consisted of two stabbed fourteen-year-olds and a disgruntled customer attacking his local pub with an electric drill. At quarter to five he felt his contribution to law and order had been made. He parked off the high street, sunk two shots of pure grain vodka into iced Nicaraguan espresso and put his seat back. In an hour he'd be off duty, and in a couple more he'd be on a date with an art student he'd recently arrested for drugs possession. All he had left to do, so he thought, was avoid getting any more blood on his suit.

The BMW tore into view before he'd taken a sip. There was a screech of tyres; someone screamed. Belsey watched it skid around the corner of Heath Street, almost tipping onto two wheels. Pedestrians dived off the crossing. A taxi swerved to avoid it, drove through the window of Gap Kids.

Belsey stuck his sirens on. He jammed his drink in the holder and swung back onto the high street, lifting his radio.

'Got a pursuit: silver BMW heading south on Rosslyn Hill. Possible injured up by Hampstead tube.'

Still no other sirens. Belsey sighed, raised his seat and took his own car over sixty. The force owned good Skodas tweaked for high-speed driving. This wasn't one of them. He could hear the control room trying to scramble back-up, but no one was nearer than a mile away. You and me, he thought. He kept tight with the car as they approached Belsize Park. It looked like the driver was alone.

The BMW stuck to the high street. Which was odd. There were emptier roads if he wanted an escape but the driver had a plan, or liked having an audience. Or he didn't give a fuck, was high, having the time of his life; sun's up, steal a car. Belsey waved for him to pull over. It was optimistic. They crashed through a set of red lights at the junction with Pond Street and Belsey knew someone was going to get killed. He prepared to abandon the pursuit. Then the driver braked.

The BMW skidded straight over the crossing. Belsey veered to the side, clipped a minibus and swung to a stop twenty metres further down the hill. He grabbed his cuffs as the BMW's door opened and a white man in black gloves jumped out. The driver pulled up a hood, grabbed a black rucksack from the car.

'Pursuit on foot,' Belsey radioed. 'Belsize Park.'

The man barged through pedestrians. But he was off home ground, it seemed: he sprinted into an alleyway at the side of Costa Coffee. Belsey knew it was a dead end. He took the clip off his spray and turned the corner.

Something swung towards his face. Belsey lifted his arm. Metal slammed into his elbow and then his left cheek. He turned, dropping the spray, blinded with pain. He heard the man run deeper into the cul-de-sac. Belsey made sure he was still blocking the only way out. He extended his arm. It worked. He had vision. He picked up his spray and turned back to the alleyway, face throbbing.

'Police! Come out with your hands in front of you!'

The alleyway ended at a patch of concrete behind the coffee shop. It was sometimes used for parking, with space enough to squeeze in three or four cars. But no one was parked there now. There was no suspect either, just weeds fringing cracked tarmac.

'Come out slowly. I can see where you are.'

Nothing moved. The empty space was blocked at the end by a small brick building. No way in, blank metal panels blocking what must once have been a doorway; no handles on them, no lock. Belsey pushed and they were sealed shut. The building had no visible windows, nothing anyone could get through. It was flanked by high fencing, topped with rusted barbed wire. The fence wasn't climbable. It divided the parking area from junk-strewn brambles. Even if you could climb the fence, there was nowhere to go, and Belsey would have heard the chain-link rattle. The man had disappeared.

The cavalry arrived a minute later. Belsey went back to the main road and saw a lot of flashing blue lights and his colleagues disembarking, less brightly, wiping sweat and staring at the minor pile-up in the road.

'He's gone,' Belsey said.

'You lost the guy?'

'You off the pace, Nick?'

'Get a look at him?'

'He had his hood up,' Belsey said. 'Pretty sure he was white. In a dark grey hoodie. He had a rucksack. And gloves, I think. Was anyone hurt, up by the station?'

'Nothing serious. You reckon he was in gloves?' They squinted at the sun. 'Where did he go?'

'Down beside the coffee shop. It doesn't lead anywhere.'

His colleagues wandered into the alleyway, turning their radios down. Belsey assessed the moment of drama preserved in the road: his car and the BMW each with their driver's door thrown open, black lines scarring the tarmac behind them. He thought of the sudden stop. And then the sense of purpose that led up to it. The driver knew where he was going.

Belsey reached into his own car and shoved the vodka under the passenger seat. Then he called the control room and ran a check on the BMW. It had been reported stolen three days ago, taken from outside a house in Highgate. Belsey stepped into the Costa. A barista asked for his order.

‘The parking lot at the back, does that belong to you?’

‘It’s not ours.’

‘Do you know who owns it?’

‘No.’

His colleagues emerged back onto the high street, shrugging. Their first thought would be that he’d fucked up somehow. They would suspect him of getting it wrong: intoxication, imagination, heatstroke. He walked past them, back into that closed stub of world and searched for CCTV. There were few corners of London so unloved that no one filmed them. Sure enough, mounted high on one of the fence’s struts was a fixed camera, angled to cover the bare space. It was weather-beaten but looked in working condition. *Protected by Stronghold*, a sign beneath it announced. Stronghold gave a London telephone number.

Belsey called it. No one answered. He searched for Stronghold on his phone. There were no security companies with that name.

He ran a search on the phone number itself. It didn’t link to anything about Stronghold, but was offered as the maintenance contact number on a smart-looking page for an organisation called Property Services Agency. According to its website, PSA managed facilities for the UK government and armed forces.

Belsey turned towards the empty lot. He stared at the bleached cans and broken furniture in the weeds, the back of Costa, finally the building which sealed the alley shut.

This structure was odd, he saw now. The base was perfectly round. The floor above it formed a square tower with ventilation slats.

Belsey peered through the chain-link fence at the side. A square brick outcrop to the building jutted into the brambles. This did have something that looked like it might once have been a window, but it was boarded up now. He stepped back and appraised the structure as a whole. It possessed an air of seriousness. Something began to play at the edges of his memory.

Belsey walked two minutes down the high street. He found an identical structure on the corner of a residential road, the same round base and a ventilation tower on top of it, only this one was painted entirely white. Years ago he had asked one of the older Hampstead CID officers what it was and promptly buried the answer. He had passed the building a thousand times since and not thought about it again. The structure sat behind tall gates. Through them, Belsey could see an entrance to the tower, sealed by black mesh with a bright yellow sign: *DANGER: DEEP SHAFT.*

## TWO

Most CID officers were in the canteen when he got back. Belsey checked the swelling on his face and took a paracetamol. He bought what passed for a coffee and joined the noisiest table: Detective Constable Derek Rosen, oldest on the team, was working solemnly through a plate of chips. DC Rob Trapping, twenty years less worn, had come in for an evening shift armed with Ray-Bans and a handheld electric fan. With them were Wendy Chan and Janice Crosby, civilian stalwarts who managed the front desk. They were all talking about a new detective sergeant who had apparently arrived that morning.

Belsey waited, wondering why he was the last to hear about these things. In a lull he said: 'Up on Haverstock Hill there's a round, white building. On the corner of Downside Crescent.' The group turned to him.

'The old bomb shelter,' Rosen said.

'Bomb shelter?' It was coming back to him. 'There's another one behind Costa,' Belsey said.

Officers at an adjacent table turned, ready to be amused. They were familiar with Belsey's tangents. DC Derek Rosen, being the station's elder statesman, held up a fat hand.

'It's not another one,' he said. 'It's another entrance to the same shelter.' He leaned back and wiped the ketchup from his mouth. Rosen liked the War. He started wearing a poppy in September. 'In case one of them is hit when you're down there,' he elaborated.

'That would make it about half a kilometre long,' Belsey said.

'It is.'

'There's one in Camden as well,' Crosby added.

'Where?'

'Behind Marks & Sparks.'

‘How many are there?’

‘There’s a few about,’ Rosen said. ‘Five or six in London, maybe more.’

‘What are they used for now?’

‘Used for?’

‘Someone’s looking after them,’ Belsey said. ‘The Belsize shelter’s still got a camera on it. What’s down there?’

There was silence, a few shrugs. No one knew.

‘Why?’ Rosen asked.

‘The guy I was chasing, I think he might have gone in.’

This provoked laughter alongside a more considered scepticism, but no more information. Talk turned to cold beer and evening plans.

Belsey wanted to go down.

He’d need a warrant. If he could prove his man entered, hit a police officer, was an ongoing threat . . . One problem was that, technically, Belsey was meant to be on restricted duties. He’d misbehaved last year, toying with some minor identity theft, and this was his punishment: sit back, do the grunt work, don’t chase. Then he remembered the conversation he’d walked in on. If there was a new sergeant he might be able to take advantage, hustle authorisation before they caught up with his dubious credentials.

‘What do we know about the new Sarge?’ he asked.

‘Fit,’ Trapping said. He aimed his fan in Belsey’s face. ‘Chilli hot, my friend.’ The rest of the table shook their heads. Trapping winked. He was the kind of officer Belsey admired: untroubled. Twenty-four, six foot four, and a police detective, confident that these facts were good news for himself and society.

‘She’s meant to be very good,’ Crosby said.

‘I didn’t think we were getting anyone.’



‘We decided, if we stopped paying you, we could afford the Sergeant.’ Rosen dropped a chip into his mouth.

‘What’s her name?’

‘Kirsty Craik.’

‘You’re joking.’

Belsey went up to the CID office. There was something different, and after a few seconds he realised what it was: the place *felt* like an office: an air of quiet industry, of paperwork being dutifully completed. Detective Constable Adnan Aziz winked, then nodded to the corner office. Belsey knocked on the open door. A woman with a blonde ponytail looked up and smiled coolly.

‘Nick.’

‘Kirsty.’

Kirsty Craik stood up, smoothing her skirt. She offered her hand and seemed aware that it was an odd form of greeting after their last physical contact. Belsey tried to ignore a pang of nostalgic lust.

‘How are you doing?’ he said.

‘Good. I heard you might be around.’

‘I’m told it’s expected of me. It’s nice to see you.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Of course.’

Craik didn’t look too fazed. Here was that law of nature that gathers up the indiscretions you’ve left behind and strews them in front of you. They did the split-second routine: checked each other’s bare ring fingers, apportioned guilt.

‘So, take a seat,’ she said. ‘What are the chances?’

‘Moderately high, I guess. It’s a small police force.’

‘Smaller by the day. What happened to your face?’

‘Straight in with the insults.’ Belsey smiled. Craik rolled her eyes. ‘I was chasing someone. They didn’t like it so they hit me.’

‘Are you all right?’

‘Never felt better.’ He had felt better. And he had looked better, he realised. Craik, though, looked in good shape, even after another few years in the force. She still had the blue eyes, wet and bright. They could make her seem startled when she was just thinking. He’d learned that. He’d been assigned to mentor her during the twilight days of his posting at Borough station. She was new to CID; he was a few weeks away from nearly being sent to jail along with half the officers on the team. So Kirsty Craik got a slightly unusual introduction to detective work.

‘Where’ve you been?’ Belsey asked.

‘Most recently, Kent. Kent CID.’ She didn’t expand on the journey that had brought her to Hampstead police station. Maybe his bosses saw an officious, straight-A new blood; someone they could push around. Belsey looked at Craik and didn’t see that at all. He made a vow that he wouldn’t try to sleep with her this time.

‘I heard Hampstead was nice,’ she said.

‘Idyllic.’

She hesitated.

‘I need to get my feet under the desk and all the other clichés. Are you in tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘Let’s talk more then.’ She glanced across her paperwork, unenthusiastically.

‘Want to pass some jobs my way?’

‘Well, seeing as you ask...’ Craik selected a duty sheet and handed it over. She seemed only slightly uncomfortable with this exchange of roles. ‘Looks like it’s been sitting around for a while.’ Belsey skimmed it and felt disappointed.

‘Break in at St Pancras public library?’ he said.

‘Third this month.’

‘That’s the literacy drive paying off.’

‘It sounds like someone in the council’s getting a bit upset. Maybe this is a north London thing, I don’t know. Want to give it a look?’

‘Of course.’ Belsey pocketed the sheet. He had been hoping for something more high-end. This killed the reunion a little. ‘Consider it done.’

When he was halfway out of the door, he turned back.

‘Kirsty, this is a bit of a long shot – the guy who hit me, I’ve been trying to figure out where he went. Near where I lost him, there’s a deep-level bomb shelter, built in the Second World War.’ He paused to gauge her reaction. She didn’t even blink. ‘I think he might have gone in. I want to take a look inside, eliminate it as a line of inquiry. I think it would be easy enough, I’d just need a warrant.’

‘A warrant on what grounds? That he disappeared close by?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Who owns it?’

‘I don’t know. There’s a camera there, belongs to some government firm, so I guess it used to be the government, maybe a subsidiary of the government.’

‘You want to get a warrant on government property but have no evidence that it’s involved in a crime?’

‘I’m not sure who owns it now. It looks disused.’

‘OK, Nick. I’ll think about it. I’m not sure we’re in a warrant situation here.’

‘I guess not.’

He went back to his desk, wrote up the afternoon’s events and filed them. A fan stirred the heat. Belsey watched DC Aziz wipe his large brow with a paper serviette, then his shaven head, then his neck. Adnan Aziz had been on the team six weeks and had already acquired the workmanlike pace necessary to survive the long haul. He offered a wad of KFC napkins to Belsey and Belsey politely declined.

What a strange end to a strange afternoon. Belsey straightened his paperwork. He briefly wondered what he had done to his life. It was almost six thirty pm; his date was in one and a half hours. He looked at the library break-ins then put them to the side and touched his face where he’d been hit. He saw the man in his grey hoodie, speeding out of nowhere, falling into existence and out again. Belsey typed *PSA* into his browser and stared at the website. He picked up his phone and called downstairs.

‘Is the storeroom open?’ he asked.

‘I haven’t locked it.’

‘I need some oil in the Skoda.’

‘Help yourself.’

Belsey went down to the basement. He took a hand axe, bolt cutters and a twelve-inch Maglite, loaded them into his car and drove to Belsize Park.

### THREE

Quarter to seven and the high street was packed. Belsize Park had continental pretensions and only three weeks of sunshine a year to exercise them. Restaurants spilled furniture onto the pavement. People spoiled the effect, sitting on kerbs holding dented cans. Office workers who'd been playing truant were safe now, lost among the crowds of reinforcements outside every pub. Everyone was drunk. Everything was launching unsteadily into the night.

Belsey parked across from the Costa, took his tools and walked down the alleyway. He stared at the entrance tower and felt it staring back at him. No one could see him from the high street. He knocked on the metal and wondered what he expected to happen. He considered obscuring the CCTV, but if someone somewhere was monitoring this set-up then they knew him by now. He made a final attempt at calling PSA, a gesture for his own conscience. Again it rang without answer. Well, they could try getting in touch with him if they had a problem.

He cut through the wire fence. Soon there was a gap big enough to clamber through. He took a broken chair from among the rubbish in the high weeds. It was stable enough on its side and got him to the boards. The wood, rotted around its nails, came away easily when he wedged the axe blade in, exposing a black gap.

Belsey chucked the rotten boards into the weeds and stared through what had been a small window, no glass, some thin, rusted mesh folded down. He shone the torch. He could make out a scattering of dead leaves, curved brick walls and the grille of an ancient lift. Narrow passageways led either side of the lift. He hid the axe and bolt cutters among the brambles, then pulled himself up to the ledge and jumped in. The bare concrete made for a heavy landing. He straightened and tingled. It was dark. A lot cooler than outside. The

ventilation slats afforded milky strips of light. The floor was messy with brick dust and bird feathers.

He peered through the lift's grille into the endless black shaft. He checked the inside of the front panels that blocked the entrance and saw a brass padlock fastening them, cheap but new. He looked for scratches around the lock; hardly any. He handled the cold metal. Then he walked around the lift to the back of the turret. The torch beam lit a lot of white growth like cotton wool; not cobwebs. He peeled a strand. It was a kind of mould. It stuck to his hands. Then, where the mould had been cleared, he found a wooden door. Belsey turned the handle and it opened, towards him. On the other side concrete stairs spiralled downwards between blackened brickwork.

'Hello?' he called.

He felt stupid. He stepped in and eased the door closed behind him, leaving it just ajar. The stairs twisted around the mesh cage of the lift shaft. Dust-furred suspension ropes sunk down inside the cage. Belsey descended five steps, then ten, then committed to reaching the bottom. He followed the torch beam, timing his descent. The blood-like smell of rusting iron and damp stone grew thicker. He felt he was being swallowed – that it was no longer curiosity driving him but some form of peristalsis. The shelter nourished itself on over-curious detectives. Maybe his man in the BMW procured them.

Two minutes later he paused, still on the stairs, and tried to assess his depth. The earth above him rumbled. So he was beneath the tube. The track between Hampstead and Belsize Park ran almost two hundred feet below the surface. That was a fair slice of London clay above his head. He remembered how much he liked space, being able to move, change location if he wanted. On the two occasions he'd been locked in a cell this was the revelation: he didn't think he was claustrophobic because he was rarely confined. After another minute Belsey reached a corrugated iron panel screwed into the walls either side, blocking the way

down. A notice had been pasted over the metal a long time ago: *DANGER: NO ENTRY*. But someone had decided to ignore the notice, smashing the metal off its fixings. Belsey pushed and it toppled over with a clang.

‘Police!’ he said, then forced a laugh to take the edge off the silence. Here was the law: darkness behave. He stepped over the metal. No more stairs. A short corridor led to a brick wall. To his left, a cell of rusting machinery. To his right there was a heavy iron door, painted battleship grey with a handwheel in the centre. It was the sort of thing you might find in a bank vault. Belsey tried turning the wheel, then pulled hard and the door eased towards him on recently oiled hinges.

He couldn’t understand what he was seeing at first: iron racks, long rows of metal shelving, which he realised, after a moment, were beds. Three-tiered bunk beds. The dormitory was low with a rounded ceiling formed by arched sections of metal. The walls glistened in the torchlight. Belsey walked in. The beds stretched endlessly down each side. To the left was a door with a tin sign: *Warden’s Post*. The warden’s post was a small square room with a wooden seat and a desk supporting one empty champagne bottle. Evidently the warden had been celebrating. Belsey lifted the bottle: 1970 Krug. He sniffed it and could still smell the alcohol. There were fresh fingers marks in the dust.

A porcelain sink at the back of the warden’s post contained flakes of plaster. Above it was a cupboard. Belsey opened the cupboard and found a heap of tiny bones and a mouse skull, like parts from an assembly kit. On the top shelf were two brown pharmaceutical bottles. One was labelled ‘Evipan’, the other ‘Dexedrine’. They were empty. No date, no patient name. They weren’t standard pharmacy labels.

He checked his watch. It was five past seven but this felt as if it related to somewhere far away. Belsey walked back into the dorm. He tested a bunk with his hand then lay down on the metal. It was comfortable enough when his weight settled. He switched the torch off. The

darkness was so thick it had its own texture. It bristled. The mind rebelled and projected images, then patterns, then tried to come to terms with the total absence of sight. This is death, he thought. He could smell old blankets. There was a wave of stale fear left by the original shelterers, then boredom, then both passed. He began to feel an astonishing sense of calm, as if someone had just explained that the world above ground was an elaborate hoax.

He sat up and switched the Maglite back on. There were the curved ribs of wall, like whale bones. A faded sign: *Put out all lights before leaving at night*. Then his torchlight hit glass, low down: bottles glinting on the floor between the bunks. He stepped closer. Champagne bottles. They had been arranged like skittles. These ones were unopened. There were more cases stacked against the sides: sealed 1970 Krug, seven cases, six bottles each. Then, further in, smaller, unmarked boxes. Belsey tore them open. Taylor's Vintage Port and Hennessy cognac. It was all old: labels in styles he recognised from framed adverts on pub walls. The boxes were marked *For Dispatch: Red Lion*. Which Red Lion had lost this haul? There were also cartons of Embassy cigarettes and three plastic cases marked with a first-aid cross. Belsey opened one and whistled: eleven bottles of pills. They had the same neat, bare labels as the two he had seen in the cupboard, only these were still brimming: hexobarbitone, modafinil, sodium amytal, Evipan, Pentothal, benzylpiperazine. He'd stumbled upon a treasure trove.

Belsey stuffed a couple of medication bottles into his jacket pocket, then took the foil off a Krug and popped the cork. The champagne ran over his hands and fizzed in the dirt. He swigged. It was fine champagne. Even at room temperature – subterranean temperature. There were many Red Lion pubs, many he knew and had enjoyed, few with a wine list like this. The bubbles crackled around his shoes; then all was silent with secret joy. He swigged again. It was peaceful. He tried to remember the last time he'd been out of the earshot of sirens.



7.20 p.m. and Belsey hauled himself out through the window, blinking at the shine of the present day. He brushed Blitz dust off his suit. It was remarkably unstained, which seemed to accentuate the ease, and therefore opportunity, of the whole thing.

He called a contact as he drove back to the station: Mr Kostas, proprietor of Diamante's on the Seven Sisters Road. They went back years, and Belsey knew Kostas could do with some help. He'd started talking about torching the place.

'Mr K. I've got a few crates of bubbly going cheap, if you're interested.'

'How cheap?'

'Champagne at twenty. It's genuine Krug. Also cognac at ten, which is robbing myself. I'll throw in five cartons of cigarettes, maybe a bottle of port.'

'How much have you got?'

'Forty bottles thereabouts.'

'Saturday I've got a hen party coming, Nick. You do something that looks classy at fifteen a bottle I'd get the lot.'

'I'll be in touch.'

Belsey made a quick calculation: fifteen a bottle, six bottles a crate, make two or three trips up and down, plus a hundred quid for the cigarettes, then the meds – benzyloxypropylpiperazine was an upper, so was Dexedrine; he didn't know modafinil; hexobarbitone was presumably a barbiturate. Say five hundred for the drugs at a very conservative estimate and he was sitting on over a grand.

He got back to the station and sat at his desk. The office was empty, fan still turning. The real world felt disappointing after his adventure. He reached into his pocket and retrieved a pill bottle, studying it in the light. It was real. Belsey wondered when he could go back down. Live his Blitz fantasy. Take shelter. What did he know about London in the War? He

saw the dome of St Paul's, indomitable, surrounded by destruction. He'd been told that in Regent's Park there was rubble from bombed houses buried ten feet deep. In summer the grass died above it because the bricks couldn't hold water.

He turned his computer on, typed *Blitz* into his browser and clicked *I'm feeling lucky*. A black and white photograph appeared. It showed a group of people standing next to a fresh bomb crater. *A Crowd on Walbrook, 2 May 1941*. The caption stated that one and a half thousand people had been killed in raids the previous night. Belsey looked at the faces of the crowd, expecting numb shock. But some were smiling. They had formed an orderly queue, waiting to peer down. He read the caption fully. *Members of the public queued to see the temple of Mithras, a Roman temple forgotten beneath the City of London, revealed by the overnight bombing*. Belsey tried to see the temple in the blackened crater. He printed a copy and folded it into his jacket.

Maybe he could go down tomorrow. He should have brought up a bottle of champagne for his date. That would have been cute. And then he had a better idea.

He put the pill bottles away in his desk then took one out again. He dropped half a benzylpiperazine. If it was stale it wouldn't kill him, if it was still lively it would knock the dust off and get him bright-eyed and articulate. He stood up and checked the widow. The late shift was arriving. There was some impressive sunburn; no one looked very happy. Sirens came from every direction as the evening began to curdle. London was turning edgy with undelivered promises.

Late shift, which meant it was almost 8 p.m.

Belsey shaved in the CID toilets. The swelling had gone down, which looked more appropriate for a date, if less heroic. There was no time to get home first, not that it was ever tempting. Home, currently, was the crumbling Hotel President on Caledonian Road. The arrangement had been a stop-gap while Belsey looked for a flat and had extended to six

months now. It meant he could pay by the week and never had to worry about running out of soap. He didn't spend more time there than he had to. He shaved, showered, splashed on some of Trapping's Calvin Klein aftershave, found a box of condoms at the back of his desk drawer.

Halfway out of the station he saw Kirsty Craik, alone in the canteen. The canteen's shutters were all down. Belsey stopped. He felt a pang of guilt about the shelter, a pang of lingering disbelief that she should have reappeared in his life. He brushed his suit again.

'Working overtime already.'

She looked up, a little weary, not ungrateful for distraction. In front of her were personnel files.

'Just pausing before home. It's cooler down here.'

'Where are you living?'

'Kentish Town.'

'Good area.'

She nodded and studied him with an expression he remembered: contemplative, undecided.

'Do we need to talk?' Craik asked.

'We're OK, I think. As far as I'm concerned you're the new DS. I've seen you in action and you're good. Professionally, I mean. I'm looking forward to it.'

She smiled, then softened her smile.

'You're on restricted duties.' Belsey nodded. So she'd checked his file. What kind of journey would she imagine he'd been on, reading that? 'How are you finding it?' Craik asked.

'Restrictive.' He wondered what else she'd been told, pictured her face as she was warned about him: *Oh, he's trouble, is he?* 'Things are fine, though. Much better. But when

full duty wants me back I'm ready to serve. Restricted sometimes feels like being a Community Support Officer.'

'You could visit schools, give talks.' Craik smiled.

'I'd happily visit schools and give talks.'

'I don't think anyone's going to be sending you to any schools, Nick.'

She was watching him, calculating something. Old flame was a strange expression, Belsey thought. Maybe that was the point. It was all made more complicated by the way memory gets thick with fantasy. And they had liked each other. That had been the problem, although he couldn't put his finger on the logic of it right now.

'This must be odd for you,' she said.

'Odd for both of us. But there are odder things in life. Last month I attended a scene where someone had broken into a vet's surgery and OD'd on Euthasol. They were there, stretched out on the operating table. We work well together, you know that. I said you'd rise fast.'

He prepared to leave before the conversation got deeper. Then she surprised him.

'Where's good for a late bite around here? Dark rum and dry roasted peanuts – that was your dinner of choice, I seem to recall.'

The late hour had turned the gleam of her eyes opaque. Good CID eyes, hard to read. But the offer was clear enough. Part of him would have loved to. There would be time, he thought. If this was how it was going to go.

'On the high street head to La Traviata. It's better than it looks. Or try Carluccio's. Skip Nights of India. Believe me.' He smiled again, didn't offer to accompany her, and she cast a detective's gaze across his suit and fresh shave. He felt the reek of Calvin Klein coming off him.

'You've got a date.'

‘Just meeting a friend.’

‘OK, Nick. Don’t be late for your friend.’ She turned back to the paperwork but not quick enough to hide her blush.

‘See you tomorrow. Bright and early to catch the library robbers.’

He left, amused by a faint regret. Then his phone buzzed, and all thoughts evaporated: *On way*, three kisses.

Jemma with a J, as she’d introduced herself in the custody suite. Someone who was all future. His chat-up line: ‘You take three grams of cocaine on a political protest? How much fun is it meant to be?’ Third date, three kisses. Time to put a plan into action.

He visited the florist’s by Belsize Park station and bought a bunch of carnations with cream petals and crimson edges. The Co-op only had birthday candles, but they were better than nothing. He bought new batteries for the Maglite, paid ten pence for an extra-large shopping bag to hide it all in. He went into the Haverstock Arms and ordered two glasses of cava, drank them, placed the glasses in the bag with the torch and flowers.

Jemma with a J was twenty-two years old: a student of art, a tequila girl and a political protestor. Three noble ways to pass the time. She’d love it. She’d get to know him a little better. And it would save him the embarrassment of explaining his current living arrangements. So far he had visited the club where she worked a couple of times, paid for one dinner together, then last weekend she invited him to some free drinks at a gallery launch. Still no bed time. She’d asked for a glimpse of his life, perhaps in that misguided belief that police detectives roll with some kind of glamour. Other than the glamour they make for themselves. He was going to show her his art.