

# Alternative Outcome

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**Ten sample chapters**

*Alternative Outcome*

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Build 2.55

*To Fleur, who never doubted that it would be worthwhile*



## Prologue

Stepping off the train at Euston was never inspiring. However smart the trains or swift the journey, the dimly-lit platforms were always an anticlimax.

I negotiated the obstacle course of pillars, impelled as always to outpace the dozens of other travellers heading the same way. Why? Was it a race?

Up the long ramp and into the thronging station concourse, I threaded my way over to the glass doors leading out to the forecourt.

As I reached for a handle, the door was pushed towards me by someone coming the other way: a woman in her thirties. Straight shoulder-length dark hair, light-coloured jacket and skirt – attractive but not exceptional.

She was moving briskly, and I stepped aside to let her pass. She half-nodded in acknowledgement, then paused abruptly, looking at me.

We stared at each other for a long moment. Did we know each other? I was on the brink of asking, but I felt sure the answer was no. Yet her look was so intense, the exchange so protracted, that we seemed bound to speak. So what else were we going to say? What conceivable subject would match up to the moment?

Finally she seemed to give a little shrug – almost as if to say, “Well, I gave it my best shot, but what can you do?” Then she was moving again, she was gone. I watched her disappear amongst the mass of people crossing the concourse.

It was nothing, yet immediately I felt a sense of loss. I should have spoken up, and now the opportunity was gone.

Had I known her after all? This puzzle nagged at me as I walked across the forecourt. She’d stirred some distant memory in me, but I couldn’t tap into it.

Then it came to me. She reminded me of a girl I’d met on holiday as a child. At the time I couldn’t have been more than eleven or twelve years old.

Surely not. Would she still be recognisable after all these years? It seemed ridiculous. More to the point, would I? That was even harder to believe.

I tried to conjure up the face I remembered from the past. Was there really any correspondence? I couldn’t tell. I hadn’t thought about the girl from my childhood for years. Yet I couldn’t altogether dismiss the idea.

Unsettling memories now trickled to the front of my mind. The girl I’d known in the past wasn’t just any girl, she was someone who had fed my adolescent romantic aspirations long after our encounter, and at the same time had helped define my sense of the fragility of expectation.

The notion that I’d actually known her was largely wishful thinking. I’d wanted to know her, that was for sure, but I’d been too shy to follow through. Our brief and inconclusive encounter, and others like it, had blighted my adolescent years. No wonder I’d shunted this one to the back of my mind.

I headed on towards Euston Road.

## PART 1

## Chapter 1

### Two years later

“Here’s to your first million – and ten weeks at the top of the best-seller list.” Joanna lifted her glass and clinked it against mine, smiling encouragingly.

“Here’s to it.” My smile was a little more forced than hers, but her enthusiasm was infectious. “But maybe ten weeks is a bit optimistic. Let’s agree on eight.”

She settled into a corner of the sofa without being asked and held out her glass for a top-up. “But just a small one. I don’t want to be reeling when I pick Jeremy up.” She studied the diminutive glass I’d given her. “Unlikely, I should think.” She looked up again. “John sends his regards.”

John, her husband, was a friend of mine from college days, but since they’d married a few years back I seemed to have seen more of her than him. By coincidence they’d ended up living just a few streets away from me in south London, and she’d taken to making unannounced visits like this in the middle of the afternoon, usually on her way to collect her young son from school. Since I worked from home, I was usually here when she called.

I wondered idly, at moments like this, whether Joanna sought out my company because I was now single and she was attracted to me, or for the opposite reason – because she regarded me as safe enough not to make any moves on her. At such times I was also uncomfortably conscious that if I’d been having this discussion with her, she would have been chiding me for such cynical, self-doubting thoughts. “Can’t I just be a friend?” she would have said.

I looked down at her now, considering her dark hair, her warm brown eyes and her slight tendency to excess weight – held in check by endless dieting, or so she often told me. The truth was that Joanna wasn’t my type, though I couldn’t easily have said what *was* my type. If we’d been discussing the matter, she would have made me itemise my must-have features, whereas to me, attractiveness usually hung on some indefinable aura.

I did value her friendship, though – probably a lot more highly than I realised.

Belatedly I answered her, “Give John and Jeremy my best.”

“Remind me, Mike – is it Amazon you’ve published your book on?”

I sat down beside her. “No, it’s on Endpaper – one of the other online publishers. They seem to offer the best deal for authors – the ones who actually sell any copies, that is.”

“Sorry, yes, you did tell me.” She sipped her wine. “Well, I think your book is great. You ought to sell loads of copies.”

I smiled at this positivity. “Well, it’s a crowded market. Many are called, few are chosen – all that. I’m not exactly holding my breath. At least it’s out there now.”

“You need to promote it. Why don’t you get all your friends to buy it and write glowing reviews? I can be the first. I know I’ve already read it, but I haven’t paid for it yet.”

“You are too kind.” I smiled at her. “Actually a couple of other friends have promised to look out for it, and they say they’ll pay real money to buy it. But I don’t really want fake reviews. It’s like shouting out ‘I’m self-published.’ It devalues the whole process.”

“All the more reason to get those reviews written, though. At least it means you’ll be starting on a level playing field with everyone else.”

I sighed. She was probably right, but I didn’t want to think in that way. The whole idea of writing a book had been to step away from the rat race of commercial journalism, but it had dawned on me long ago that in its own way the literary world was just as cut-throat.

She wasn’t done yet. “You could have a web site for the book as well, and a blog.”

“I’ve got a basic web site. Didn’t I tell you? And I’ve got my Facebook and LinkedIn pages set up.”

“One of those bastard literary agents should have picked up your book and run with it.” She said this with real feeling. I had reported on my progress with them last year, though I now rather

regretted doing this. Joanna seemed to feel she had taken a stake in the project, and I wasn't sure I was quite comfortable with this.

"There's a lot of competition. They need to be confident that the publisher will get their investment back. Only outstanding books actually get published in the real world."

"Who says yours isn't outstanding?"

"Your support is greatly appreciated, even if your judgement is clouded."

She reached over and punched me in the arm. "Bollocks! Stop being so bloody self-deprecating. You should have more confidence."

"Perhaps."

She raised her glass to me again. "Well, today is still a red-letter day, so here's to you and your book. May it have many grateful readers."

I raised mine again in return.

\* \* \*

My mobile phone buzzed on the dining table. I apologised and stood up quickly. Freelance writers can't afford to let any call go unanswered.

The voice on the other end was economical to a fault. "Mike. Jason. Rick Ashton. Lunch. Tomorrow."

I couldn't resist holding the phone away from my ear melodramatically and mouthing obscenities at it. Joanna raised her eyebrows. I knew exactly what the caller, Jason Bright, was talking about, and it annoyed me. He was the deputy editor of a logistics magazine, and he was telling me he wanted me to interview the head of a national parcels company over lunch.

I had no complaint about the commission itself, which should earn me a useful few hundred pounds. What grated was that these things were never arranged at such short notice, as he was well aware. Some other journalist must have cried off, and now he was asking me to step in at the last minute. Everyone's mop-up guy – that was me.

Perhaps I should have taken it as a tribute to our long-standing familiarity that we could talk in shorthand like this, but to me it merely summed up the imbalance in our relationship. He demanded, I complied.

I drew breath, mainly to avoid seeming in too much of a hurry. "Should be OK, yes."

"Excellent." He hesitated. "And you're all right with this, are you?"

Now he was off the script. I wasn't sure what he meant.

"All right? Yes – why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just ... never mind, if you're on it that's fine." He started to reel off the place and time for the meeting.

Joanna stood up and gave me an exaggerated wave, pointing at her wrist watch and then towards the front door. She whispered, "What are you doing on Thursday?"

I held the phone away from my ear. "Let me see." I pretended to think. "Nothing."

"Come and have a meal with us. John should be back from his trip, and he'd love to hear about the book."

She slipped quietly out of the room, and I lifted the phone back to my ear. "So you're definitely all right with this, are you?" Jason was saying again. "Sixteen hundred words by the end of the month?"

\* \* \*

I returned the half-empty wine bottle to the fridge and poured myself a whisky instead. A bit early in the day, but so what? I opened the sliding door on to my diminutive patio and stood there a moment, breathing in the unseasonably warm March air. The achievement of getting my book online and on sale had given me a brief buzz, but it wasn't going to earn me my first million any



time soon; and meanwhile I still had to work. Unfortunately, that meant dealing with people like Jason.

What made matters worse was that two years ago I'd occupied his role – deputy editor of a long-established transport and logistics magazine. Our specialisation: trucks, vans, warehouses, home deliveries – everything to do with getting goods from A to B.

In an era when print publishing seemed on the way out, the publication still had a respectable circulation, not to mention a lively and popular web site. I'd had a reasonably free rein to call the shots when it came to choosing which articles to write, and I could contact freelancers and dump work on them to my heart's content.

But I'd fucked up. Not in any specific way, just in general. It didn't help when I came back from an interview one day with barely enough material for ten lines of copy, but the malaise ran deeper than that. Somewhere along the line I'd lost my sense of the point of it all, and my discontent must have communicated itself to my employers.

They were very gentlemanly, of course. They simply explained that they were rationalising, and my role was no longer needed. The press was under fire from the internet, and they had to watch their costs. They would keep me on as a freelance, but I could also work for other publications. I might even end up better off.

I hadn't. Two thirds of my work was still for them, and to compound the indignity, a year ago they'd appointed Jason to what had been essentially my role.

Meanwhile, any other work I picked up seemed to involve articles on increasingly outlandish subjects. It was almost as if my clients were defying me to say no. Then they could cut me loose with a clear conscience.

To hell with them all. I poured myself another whisky.

## Chapter 2

“Michael,” Rick Ashton greeted me, his strong Australian accent immediately evident. “Always a pleasure.”

I tended to be wary of this sort of instant cheeriness. Usually you had to jump through hoops to get interviews with top people like Ashton; then the great man or woman would wave away all the hassle as though it were merely an irritant. It was a game with an established set of rules.

Today, though, I was simply grateful for his goodwill. I’d woken with a hangover, then wasted far too much time finishing an overdue article. In the end I’d left home almost too late to make it to this meeting, which was being conducted in a discreetly upmarket West End hotel.

Ashton beamed at me – a well-groomed figure in his late forties or early fifties with a full head of dark hair and an expression of perpetual amusement. He was perhaps a shade heavier than he should have been, but if so it was a close call, and I always felt there was a natural elegance about him. Although no taller than me, he still somehow managed to tower over me. Today he was wearing a pinstripe suit and a tie.

“What do you think of the wide tube stock?”

I stared at him blankly for a moment, glancing for help at Darren McLeish, his young PR man, who was sitting discreetly to one side. He gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

“On the District line. The latest trains.”

Enlightenment dawned. I’d known Ashton slightly for at least five years, and for some reason he had gained the mistaken impression early in our relationship that I was a railway enthusiast. Ever since then his ice-breaker had been some sort of observation about trains.

I prepared to improvise a reply, but then felt a sudden desire to press the metaphorical reset button. Surely we could find something more relevant to pass the time over? “Actually, the big thing with me at the moment is that I’ve just published my first novel. Online, that is.”

He stopped mid-stream. “You’re a dark horse.” He looked at me with what appeared to be genuine interest. “What kind of book is it?”

“A mystery thriller.”

“Just my kind of thing. Where can I get a copy?” To prove he meant this he immediately pulled a tiny leather-bound notebook from an inside pocket and made a show of holding his pen poised. I couldn’t help smiling inwardly. Even his selection of leisure reading evidently had to be approached as an executive decision.

I told him the publisher’s web address and he wrote it down carefully, asking, “What’s it about?”

I hesitated. I hadn’t intended to talk about the book to anyone I knew through my job, and I was also wary of giving away too much of the plot. I felt it should speak for itself. However, clearly I’d committed myself now, so I tried summarising the story in a few sentences.

He listened carefully and nodded, apparently satisfied. “Good stuff.” He looked at me inscrutably for a moment, then abruptly unclicked his pen, put the notebook away and sat forward in his chair. The formal interview had begun.

\* \* \*

As always with Ashton, the session went well. You couldn’t help feeling beguiled by his plain-talking charm. He made it seem that running a major parcels company was something anyone with a modicum of intelligence could do – and if you had any suggestions about how he could do it better, he was more than happy to hear them.

He was also good value. His company was currently under fire in the press and the Twittersphere for poor service levels and frequent mis-deliveries, but he was ready to acknowledge all these problems before boasting about solutions. He understood the goodwill value. It meant I could write what looked like a frank, informed interview, even though we both

understood that it was largely choreographed by him and his people, and my ultimate message would be broadly the one he wanted to convey.

After fifty minutes the three of us adjourned to the hotel's elegant restaurant: small and even cosy, though it had been made to seem spacious through judicious use of mirrors, white walls, brushed steel pillars and soft grey accents.

I'd wondered if Ashton would skip this bit, given that I was a stand-in today, but he seemed committed to going the whole nine yards. Before long we were sipping Sauvignon Blanc and putting the world to rights.

As we chatted, a man in a grey suit materialised by our table.

"Richard," he said, addressing Ashton, "what a pleasant surprise to see you here today." But he didn't seem especially pleased; his expression was difficult to read, but his tone suggested heavy irony. His accent was hard to place: not British, not discernibly from anywhere specific. I couldn't glean much from his appearance either. He was a tallish, well-toned white man in his mid to late forties, perhaps with middle European features. He had immaculate slicked-back black hair and an open-neck shirt.

Ashton looked up at him, apparently undaunted. "Janni, good to see you." He turned to me. "Mike, this is Janni Noble." He pronounced Janni with a soft J, like "Yanni". He added, "Our folks up in the North West have been doing some business with him."

Of course. Janni Noble. I knew the name, though I'd only ever seen him in photographs until now. Peripherally, he'd been involved in an article I'd written several years before, though we'd never met.

The man looked at me enquiringly. Ashton said, "Janni, this is Mike Stanhope, an associate of mine from the business press. We're just putting the world to rights."

I reached out my hand. He hesitated for a moment, regarding me coolly, then gave me a light, almost reluctant handshake. "I know you from somewhere." It was a neutral comment, yet somehow from this man's lips it also sounded like a threat. "It will come to me."

He turned back to Ashton and they exchanged a few more words. Then he turned back and gave me another long look. I could see a flicker of recognition dawning in his eyes. "So you are Michael Stanhope, and you are a journalist?"

"Correct."

He nodded to himself. "This is interesting."

I raised my eyebrows, but he declined to elaborate. He turned instead to rejoin his colleagues at another table, glancing back at me a final time as he walked away.

"A powerful presence," I commented to Ashton.

"You think so?" He glanced after the man. "A useful colleague. He came to our rescue up in the north last year when we needed some extra fleet resources."

I marvelled to myself at the way powerful men like Ashton could seem so unimpressed when they encountered others like them. To me, it felt as if a chill had just passed over our table. Without being invited, I poured myself another glass of wine.

## Chapter 3

“What’s your book about?” John grinned at me amiably over Joanna’s improvised goulash.

He was a happy soul; with his florid complexion, upstanding red hair and thickset build, he looked exactly like the rugby player he had been until recently, and he radiated a rugby player’s confident goodwill. He had just returned from a trip that involved trying to sell British-designed hand dryers on the Continent, which I didn’t envy him; but his lifestyle seemed to suit him well enough.

I said, “It’s a mystery story based round a robbery from a security van. Most of the gang are caught, but one of them escapes and disappears off the face of the earth. The main part of the story is about a man who tries to track him down many years later.”

John looked at me expectantly, so I added, “I based it vaguely on a real robbery back in the nineteen eighties.”

“Right.” He pondered this a moment. “And will it be published in print as well as online?”

“Huh! I doubt it. There’s too much competition.”

He nodded, perhaps searching for something else to ask. “So in real life, were all the thieves caught?”

I’d had this same reaction from one or two other people who’d asked about the book. For some reason they seemed more interested in the real story than in what I’d made of it in my novel.

Barely swallowing my frustration, I said, “Well, no one really knows. According to folklore one of them did get away, but there’s no definitive evidence. I’ve simply hypothesised that he did.” I paused, then said with exaggerated patience, “It was the underlying idea that interested me, not the real-life specifics.”

I caught Joanna giving John a warning glance, and immediately felt guilty. These were good friends. I shouldn’t be allowing my jaded attitude to upset them.

John merely said, “Ah, OK. So what happens in your story then?”

I was tempted to say “Read the book”, but this time I managed to bite my tongue. I’d already reached the conclusion he was never going to, so what was the point?

When I’d embarked on the book, I had naively assumed that all my friends and acquaintances would be pressing me for sight of it as soon as it was ready, but I’d soon found that many of them seemed resoundingly underwhelmed by the idea. I hadn’t decided yet whether this was simply because they weren’t interested in mystery thrillers, or because they couldn’t conceive of a world in which I would be capable of writing one that they would want to read.

I took a deep breath and made an effort. “Well, the book follows the fortunes of the man who escaped, and his family.” I hesitated. “I based the family on real life too, but the people I had in mind had nothing to do with the actual robbery. It was a family I came across on holiday when I was young. I tried to contact them years later, but no one knew what happened to them. They seemed to have disappeared. It seemed like a cue for a mystery story.”

Joanna shot me an accusing look. “You never told me about that.”

“I don’t tell you everything.”

\* \* \*

Later, helping Joanna to stack the dishes in the kitchen, I said, “Sorry I was a bit defensive earlier.” I glanced over at the door to make sure we were alone. John had gone upstairs to check his emails. “Sometimes people don’t seem to get the idea of this book. They focus on the wrong things. I should be more patient.”

“John doesn’t mean any harm, but he can be a bit of a philistine. I wouldn’t take any notice if I were you.”

I smiled. Joanna had supported my idea of writing a book from the start. I knew she saw it as therapy for me. She thought I’d taken too long to get used to my ex-wife Sandy’s departure, and needed a distraction. She was probably right.

She said, “So who were these people you modelled your fictitious family on, and why were they such a big secret?”

I considered this for a moment, trying to decide how to shuffle my thoughts into a coherent form. Finally I said, “To be honest, the whole idea for this book came from a tiny incident a couple of years ago. I’d just got off a train at Euston station, and I bumped into a woman I thought I knew. Afterwards I fantasised that she might be a girl I used to fancy from afar when I was a kid, when we were on holiday in Falmouth.”

“How sweet.”

I ignored this. “I had a look to see if I could track down her family, but I couldn’t find any trace of them. Then it occurred to me that there must be a story in it, and I realised the robbery theme fitted in rather well with it.”

She leaned back against the sink, absorbing this and smiling at me reflectively. “So these people that you knew as a child – how far did you get with tracking them down?”

“I didn’t get anywhere. I tried to contact the hotel where we all stayed, but it went out of business years ago. I didn’t know the family’s name, just that the girl was called Trina. Maybe Catrina? With a C or a K. Something like that. So the trail went cold straight away.”

“Couldn’t you have pushed it a bit further? People don’t really just disappear. They must be out there somewhere.”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t really that bothered. I was concentrating on the book. I was more interested in the narrative possibilities than the actual people.”

“Narrative possibilities.” She smiled mockingly at me. “You’re beginning to sound like the *Times Literary Supplement*.”

“Very funny.”

She looked at me speculatively. “You ought to try looking for them again. See if you really can track them down. I can definitely see the makings of something here.”

“Huh! Bit late now. My novel is already finished and self-published, in case you’d forgotten.”

“Maybe you’ll get some ideas for the follow-up. You could develop this into a series.”

I scowled at her. “Stop making fun of me.”

“Not at all!”

She started preparing the coffee, then turned to me again. “That woman you saw at Euston station – do you think she really was the same person you knew as a child?”

I shrugged. “I very much doubt it. It seems a bit unlikely, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so. But just imagine if it really was her!”

“What – you reckon we would fall gratefully into each other’s arms? I don’t think so.”

She laughed. “OK, fair enough.” She clattered three coffee mugs on to a tray. “But you could do with shaking up your love life a bit, Mike. It’s too long now since Sandy.”

Ah, we had to get round to my marriage break-up in the end. I said, “Thanks for reminding me.”

She wouldn’t let it go. “You’re not a bad looking guy, Mike. Plenty of my girl friends would be more than happy to step up to the plate.”

“Huh. Flattery will get you nowhere. Anyway, I suspect I’m a bit ragged round the edges these days.” I made for the kitchen door. “Can we talk about something else please?”

\* \* \*

As I walked home I wondered again about John’s question: would my book ever be published in print? I had strong memories of an abortive visit I’d paid to a literary agency a few months before.

It was one of two dozen who had already rejected the book, and by chance I happened to spot their street address in central London. I managed to talk my way in, only to find there was no one around except the office administrator, a slim woman in her mid-forties with severely-cut

greying hair and an aura of nervous energy. She knew nothing about my book, but proved unexpectedly willing to talk about the company in a general way.

“To be honest, hardly any speculative submissions are accepted,” she admitted confidentially. “It might be different at other agencies, but that’s how it is here.” He lowered her voice. “You probably know it’s sometimes called the slush pile.” A brittle laugh. “Not very flattering.”

I left my response hanging in the air, and after a moment she added, “It’s not as if we *want* to reject people’s work. We *want* to discover great new literature. That’s what we’re here for.”

I nodded. “But there isn’t a lot of it about.”

“Exactly. People think they know how to write a best seller, but they don’t.”

I asked how the firm handled unsolicited submissions. She said, “Our readers work through them when they get the opportunity.”

“Who are the readers?”

“Experienced specialists.” She declined to elaborate.

“Do you ever reject any books and then find they’ve been taken up by another agent or publisher, and they’ve become big sellers?”

“Certainly. That’s why we usually tell writers to keep trying. Some of them do, and in the end it sometimes pays off.” She pushed her chair back from her desk and stretched. “But not often.”

*Concise treatment*

1988

*The white waterfront houses of Polperro gleamed in the sun. From my clifftop vantage point I gazed down at the picturebook town, nestling in the cove like some artist's dreamscape.*

*Mixed emotions surged through me. Polperro looked simply splendid, and seemed to underpin the simmering joy I felt. She was in the world, and what's more she was in my world. That knowledge gave me an inner glow, and Polperro itself seemed to feel it.*

*But she was leaving tomorrow. Her second week had overlapped our first – I was certain of that. Six days wasted, only one more left. Too little time to step forward, to become an active player in her story, not just an onlooker.*

*Polperro mocked me. The joy it radiated was not mine. It was a joy other people felt; I seemed condemned to remain always the outsider. Her presence was a constant reproach for my inaction. I would be glad when she was gone.*

*I picked myself up and started back to rejoin my parents at the car, but I misjudged the narrow path. Nettles brushed my bare legs, an angry rebuke, and instant tears stabbed at the back of my eyes: not just from the stinging, but also from my inner turmoil. I blinked them away angrily.*

*Never mind; at least I would see her over dinner tonight, across the restaurant or somewhere out in the grounds. She would remind me of a world of infinite possibilities.*

## Chapter 4

There was something wrong with my web site.

I didn't notice at first. I was examining the site a couple of mornings after seeing John and Joanna – trying to view it as a stranger might. Did it make my book sound irresistible? Did it convey the right balance of readability, intrigue and menace? Would I want to read the book myself if I saw a description like this? Joanna had reminded me the other day that I needed to get this kind of thing right if I really wanted to ratchet up my sales.

Then I noticed a curious black panel at the very top of the browser window, obscuring part of the page and pushing other parts slightly out of position. This certainly wasn't part of the intended design.

There was some tiny, nearly-illegible grey text on the panel. I leaned forward and zoomed in. It looked like some sort of computer code. I clicked through to some of the other pages, and realised that the intrusive black panel appeared on all of them.

What the hell? I logged into the administration site – the place where I normally changed the page contents or uploaded text to my blog. There was something wrong here, too. There was no black panel this time, but some of the normal sections of the page had been nudged slightly out of position.

I sat back abruptly and let go of the mouse as if it was too hot to handle. I felt as if the site was tainted, and I shouldn't be touching it. Had it been hacked? Or was Kevin, my web designer, simply playing around with it?

I grabbed my phone and scrolled down to his number. Kevin, a freelancer, had once worked for the magazine publisher where I'd been assistant editor, and had completely rebuilt my old, simplistic web site for next to nothing to help me promote my book. He owed me the favour from a time I'd helped him rewrite the text of a site for one of his customers. The downside of our arrangement was that I never knew quite how much support he was prepared to throw in as part of the deal.

Fortunately he answered my call immediately.

"Kevin, it's Mike Stanhope. About my web site."

"What's up, mate?" He had that classic techie's tone – apparently helpful, but at the same time guarded.

"Have a look. There's a weird panel at the top of all the pages. I wondered if you were doing some more development work on it or something."

"Not guilty. As far as I'm concerned the site is finished." His tone said it all; the debt was repaid, and he had no further obligation to me.

"Fair enough. But the fact is that something's gone wrong with the site."

"Let me have a look."

There was a pause, then he said, "OK, I'm looking at the home page now. That doesn't look right, does it?"

"Exactly."

"And you haven't been uploading some bizarre content to the site, have you? Custom Javascript or something like that?"

"You must be joking. I wouldn't know how to."

"OK, well I'll need to get into the site and have a look round. Leave it with me. I'll ring you back in a few minutes."

\* \* \*

He was as good as his word.

"You've been hacked, mate. Have you been handing out your password and username or something?"

I swallowed, trying to keep my patience. "Of course not. Why would I do that?"



“I dunno. It’s just that this kind of attack is quite simplistic. It usually starts when spammers or hackers get hold of your FTP logins. That allows them to put anything they want on your site, basically.”

“Well I can’t see how it could be down to me.” I paused. “What have they actually done, anyway?”

He hesitated, perhaps trying to reduce the message to simple terms. “It’s an iframe injection attack, so far as I can see. Basically a bit of some other web site gets incorporated into your pages. It means that if someone clicks something on your site, it might send information back to the attacker’s web server instead of yours.”

“So they could intercept messages sent to me – that kind of thing?”

“Probably, yes. But this is a bit of a bodged job. You shouldn’t be able to see the iframe really – unless it’s meant to look like an advert or something. Otherwise it’s a clue that something’s wrong.”

“Well let’s not be sorry that they’re bodgers.”

He gave an ironic laugh. “True enough.”

“So can you put it right?”

“Yeah, no problem. It might take a while, though. I’ll need to go through everything to see how much damage has been done, and then change the username and password. I’ll have to get back to you.”

It was clear from his tone that he rather resented the work involved, but couldn’t think of a way to duck out of it. I thought it was probably time to end the conversation, but he now commented, “That’s strange.”

“What is?”

“Well, these iframe attacks can be quite automated. Once there’s a security breach, the injection process just kicks in.” He paused, perhaps peering at his screen. “This looks like more of a manual attack.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well ...” He drew breath to answer, then seemed to think the better of it. “It’s complicated to explain. It’s just my gut feeling.”

“OK, so what does it mean?”

“I suppose it suggests that someone was specifically targeting you – trying to capture your passwords and other stuff about you, that kind of thing.”

“Charming.”

“I can improve the site’s security and use stronger passwords. I can tighten things up generally. But if you use the same passwords for other things, I would definitely consider changing them. You never know what else these people might get up to.”

I put the phone down reflectively. Web sites got hacked all the time. I shouldn’t read any special significance into this. Yet it had never happened to me before in all the years that I’d had a basic web site and blog, and the thought that I’d been targeted intentionally was unsettling. It felt like an intrusion into my personal space, and I didn’t like it.

## Chapter 5

An unexpected phone call put thoughts of my web site out of my mind.

“Mr Michael Stanhope?” The accent was foreign, the voice distantly familiar.

“That’s me.”

The speaker seemed uncertain how to continue. He said nothing for a moment, then, “This is Tommy Noble.”

Of course. It was three or four years since we’d spoken, but the occasion was hard to forget. I’d written an investigative article for the magazine I was then working for – an exposé about international people trafficking and its impact on the haulage industry – and Tommy Noble was the key to it: Tommy, the brother of Janni Noble, the man I’d met in the restaurant with Rick Ashton.

The article came long before the subsequent international crisis over migrants from the Middle East and Africa. My piece was much more specific. It was about the trickle of people who had been entering Britain for many years, aided by a small band of specialist smugglers. They targeted individuals or small groups of people from eastern Europe and beyond, bringing them all the way from the source country to Britain in customised freight containers. The haulage industry was nervous, and my article focused on how these schemes actually worked.

I’d amazed myself by arranging an interview with Tommy Noble, a whistle-blower who was actually involved in this trade himself. That said, I couldn’t exactly claim the credit for making the contact. Originally it was he who had approached me. Seemingly he’d asked around discreetly, on the lookout for a writer who would keep his identity secret, and eventually he’d obtained my name from a driver I’d once written about – a man who was being exploited by his employer.

All the same, at the time it felt like a coup. I had vivid memories of the shivering transport café outside Luton where I’d met Tommy, and the drab yard where he’d nervously taken me to show me the custom container: empty, but still bearing clear evidence of recent occupants. All this seemed very much in keeping with the reputation I seemed to have created for myself among the fellow-journalists on my magazine.

However, I’d never spoken to Tommy since the article was published; so how come he was telephoning me two days after I’d bumped into his brother? Surely this had to be more than a coincidence?

I said, “What can I do for you?”

“Ah, well, you will remember that you took some photographs. Pictures of me ...”

I did remember. When I’d interviewed him, I’d persuaded him to let me photograph him and his container on the promise that his face would be concealed. It had seemed to me that including him in the pictures, even disguised, would make the whole article seem more real, more credible. Remarkably enough he’d agreed – on condition that I would email the images to him to prove he couldn’t be recognised.

However, in the event I’d never used the pictures. Tommy had rung me from a call-box a few days later and begged me not to. He thought – no doubt rightly – that his co-offenders would be able to identify him from the actual container, whether he himself was concealed or not.

In a way I’d been relieved. I’d already come to the conclusion that using the pictures would be pushing things too far. I didn’t want to risk his anonymity. Or perhaps more likely, I’d had a failure of nerve about the whole thing. Pictures made it all seem that bit too real.

I now said, “I do remember.”

“Good. So, what I wondered ...” He hesitated again. “I had the impression that there were more pictures. Pictures that you did not show me at the time. Is that correct?”

Were there? I thought not. I only took a few, and I was pretty sure I’d sent him all of them. “No, you saw everything there was.”

“Surely there were alternative shots, different angles, this kind of thing?” A pause. “I should very much like to see these other pictures.”

I said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think so.”

“This is unfortunate.” The disappointment was evident in his voice.

“I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Very well.” There was a long pause, then a click as he disconnected.

\* \* \*

What did this mean? Had Janni Noble asked Tommy to phone me? If so, why? And if not, what was Tommy after?

I’d never fully understood Tommy’s motivation for talking to me in the first place. From what he’d told me, his brother Janni was the moving force behind the smuggling operation, so it was hard to make out why Tommy wanted to undermine it.

In the end I’d concluded that his attitude stemmed not from principled opposition to the smuggling, rather from simple sibling rivalry. Janni actually ran the company, whereas Tommy seemed to have a relatively insignificant role in it. I suspected that he was aggrieved at being sidelined, and had decided to demonstrate how vulnerable the smuggling operation made it. In effect it was an act of rather reckless vengeance.

At the time, his reasons for speaking out hadn’t mattered to me. Nor, it now struck me, had the surprising fact that his brother – the head of an apparently thriving company – would want to be involved in this kind of activity in the first place. What mattered to me at the time was that I was able to write an interesting and topical inside story based on Tommy’s revelations.

Looking back, I could see that my shallow attitude and failure to ask obvious questions didn’t do me much credit. And to make matters worse, I’d never followed up from a journalistic point of view. I’d been side-tracked by other stories, and by events in my own life.

So what in fact did happen to the brothers after my article was published? I vaguely remembered that the whole smuggling enterprise had come to an abrupt end, but I was no longer sure of the chronology.

I opened a browser window on my laptop and flicked through press reports from the time I wrote the article. As I thought, soon afterwards the police had raided the company’s headquarters outside Oldham, near Manchester. They had arrested some of its staff, including Tommy himself, though Janni had been released without charge.

In theory, Tommy might have formed the view that I’d had something to do with this turn of events. So might Janni, though only if Tommy had revealed his own part in the article, which seemed unlikely. But logically speaking, one or both of them might consider that I’d betrayed them.

Yet I knew I’d been careful. I hadn’t named anyone in my article; hadn’t revealed where in Britain they were working from; hadn’t said which eastern European countries they were targeting. In short, I’d made the article as bland as I dared without robbing the whole thing of any substance. And no police had ever come calling on me, demanding the names of my informants. I felt sure the article had played no role in their investigation.

In any case, the whole thing had quickly died a death. Within days of the police moving in, it had been announced that the case had been dropped. I couldn’t remember now why this had happened, but browsing further, I saw that it was basically down to lack of hard evidence. Clearly the container that I’d photographed had never been found, and there had been a resolute silence among peripheral participants who had been expected to blow the whistle. Whether Janni had achieved this by cajoling or coercion wasn’t clear. The fact was that apparently no one involved wanted to see the prime suspects going down.

In theory, this meant that neither of the brothers had any real reason to be harbouring a grudge against me. Yet I couldn’t altogether dismiss the thought that one of them might be. Such concerns came with the territory.

\* \* \*

The irony was that I'd never written any further articles in this vein, and these days I wondered if I even could. I knew that some of my colleagues from that period still regarded me as a relentless investigative terrier, but in my own mind that image had never seemed to fit. I'd had to wind myself up to researching every probing piece, and eventually it had all seemed like too much effort. Other writers were being paid the same as me for turning in predictable ring-around articles or routine interviews like the one I'd conducted with Rick Ashton, so why was I putting myself through such stress?

It was around this time that my wife Sandy informed me she'd had enough of our marriage. I was never at home, I was always too serious, I wouldn't relax, I didn't know how to have a good time, it was all a mistake, bla bla.

I hadn't been able to decide at the time whether my behaviour was the result of work-induced stress, or was just my natural state. Either way, her departure seemed to kick away my resolution to do battle for every article. Six months later I was writing anodyne feature articles about cryogenic chemical tankers and airfield crash tenders, and within a year I was out of a full-time job.

Somehow, I doubted that Sandy would have found me much more congenial now than before.

## Chapter 6

I stared at the nearly-blank page of my notebook. Two days had passed since Tommy Noble's call, and I was trying to force myself to catch up with neglected work. I wasn't getting very far.

My self-imposed task this morning was to construct an article about trends in refrigerated transport. In a determined burst of activity I'd looked up and written down the telephone numbers of five companies that built truck and van bodies, but that was the sum total of my progress so far. My plan was to telephone them all, find someone at each of them who was willing to talk to me, and ask them about their latest product developments.

I tossed my pen down. "What's new? What's bleeding new?" I swivelled round in my office chair and stared out of the window. "Nothing's bleeding new sir. Fuck all is new. We are building the same old same old. Kindly sod off and leave us to do it in peace."

They wouldn't take that line, of course; they would be polite and would try to be helpful. At the end of the day, they knew they would get publicity out of it. But I felt sure they'd like to.

What could I do instead? Eighteen months ago I would have been breaking off at this point to write a bit more of my novel, which had provided an ever-available distraction from proper work. Even when it was finished, I'd spent hours fine-tuning it and then preparing extracts for potential agents. It had seemed like a project with no end, yet inevitably the end had come when I'd uploaded it to the web. It had left a void.

Should I be working on a follow-up? No, not at this precise point in time. I had no ideas for one, and anyway I wanted to see how the first one fared before committing myself to a second. I needed something else, and playing games on my PC or phone wasn't going to do it for me.

So what else? I swivelled back to my desk and sat up straighter. Well, I could get on with promoting my book online – uploading extracts to reading groups, submitting the title to review sites, tweeting about it, blogging about it. This was, after all, what I'd planned. I no longer had the excuse that my web site had been compromised. Kevin had emailed me a couple of days ago to confirm that it was now secure again and working normally.

Perversely, though, all this activity seemed too much like "real" work. What I craved was some single-minded project, whether writing a book or investigating someone or something. Even though I was fed up with doing this kind of thing for my job, it seemed I didn't mind doing it for myself.

And that's when I knew what I would do. That girl I'd known in Falmouth – I really would try to find out what had happened to her. For my book I'd built a mystery around the character I based on her; but what had happened to the real girl and her parents? Was it anything like the outcome I'd conjectured?

I stared out of the window again into a grey suburban morning. I hadn't thought properly about the real girl for years – not even when I was writing the book. I'd simply grabbed the memory and translated it into a new character who fitted my plot. She immediately took on a separate, objective existence, insulating me from thoughts of the actual person I had in mind.

Now I found myself drawn back to those distant days from my childhood, and I allowed myself to remember the yearning that the real girl had aroused in me: to be part of the adult world, to have a proper relationship with another person – an attractive, exuberant person like her. My trouble was that I didn't know how to make it happen. In my imagination it had seemed incredibly simple, but in the real world I felt invisible. I simply lacked the wherewithal to break through some impenetrable barrier between us.

Finally, incredibly, when it had seemed all hope was lost, we'd actually spoken, and she'd told me she would write to me when we both got home. But she never did. It was the first genuine relationship trauma of my life.

Objectively I wasn't surprised when I heard nothing from her. I was already adult enough not to invest high expectations in such a promise, especially when given so lightly. Yet subjectively, the disappointment had festered. For maybe six weeks I'd clung to the hope that a letter might

still arrive. Daily I'd watched for the postman, hoping against hope to see her missive drop through the letterbox. Nothing came.

Eventually I'd reconciled myself to the fact that it never would. The episode had turned into an object lesson in the way life can sometimes let you down. And although at the time I would have considered myself above such sensitivities, I knew that for years afterwards the disappointment had blighted my subsequent attempts at adolescent relationships. Either I'd approached them too intensely and frightened them away, or I'd avoided any kind of commitment from the outset, convinced that it wouldn't work. My sense of isolation had grown from year to year.

So was I now finally seeking closure, half a lifetime later? Hardly. It had all happened so long ago. But thinking back, I found it impossible not to wonder what had become of the girl herself. Presumably she was alive at this moment, about my own age and living her adult life somewhere. Where? Under what circumstances? Were her parents still around?

And I couldn't deny it – I wondered if she'd ever thought about me. Had she meant to write, but been distracted? Had she had second thoughts? Or had she never intended to keep her promise in the first place? Realistically, I could see that even if I actually found her, it was years too late now for me to be asking her any of these questions. But if I did find her, maybe the answers would be self-evident.

I glanced back at my computer screen. An entirely separate question was whether her life could possibly have followed a similar pattern to that of her counterpart in my story. The thought seemed extremely far-fetched; yet I now felt a sudden urge to find out.

And even if you discounted all the above, could she be that woman I saw at Euston? This idea seemed about as unlikely as any other, but I couldn't entirely discount it. My emotional reaction to that woman had been too intense to dismiss; she really had drawn me back to those distant days, and I could now see that in a corner of my mind it still mattered.

\* \* \*

I opened a browser window on my laptop. Was this it then – the start of my search? No, for a moment I held back. I felt that if I was to conduct a search, it also required some more practical imperative. I needed to be able to tell myself there was a tangible objective, not just a will o' the wisp ambition to resolve some issue from my childhood.

Well, it was undeniably intriguing that the hotel in Falmouth had closed down soon after we were there. It was a ready-made scenario for a mystery. Two years ago, when I'd started work on my book, I'd done a perfunctory web search on the place, but come up with very few results, and nothing to identify the girl or her family. So I would be starting with a blank canvas.

I thought about this for a moment. I didn't know these people's surname, so their subsequent lives were bound to be a mystery to me. That didn't mean they were a mystery to the world at large. I simply didn't know where to look for them.

But if I followed up and still had difficulty tracking them down, that would validate the endeavour, wouldn't it? The harder they proved to find, the more profound would be the mystery behind their disappearance, and the more worthwhile it would seem to look for them. I could feel my latent journalistic instincts stirring.

I picked up my mobile phone to check my calendar app, and found to my joy that the article on refrigeration wasn't needed for nearly three weeks. Ha! So I didn't actually have to work on it today at all.

Immediately I felt a sense of guilt. No wonder I was writing so many of my articles at the last minute these days, and doing it in a blind panic. I needed to get a grip. I couldn't afford to let customers down, and there was a mortgage to pay on this house – far higher since Sandy had left, and only just within my current means.

Yet three weeks was three weeks. The thought of doing something more interesting suddenly seemed irresistible.

\* \* \*

A new thought occurred to me. I wandered out on to the landing, opened the hatch to the loft and climbed the ladder. The air was dry and dusty. I hadn't been up here in several years – not since Sandy left. But I knew that somewhere there lurked a large collection of photographs inherited from my parents, and no doubt from *their* parents and grandparents, and it didn't take me long to find it, stashed in a bulging cardboard packing case.

It was hard to find any order amongst the contents. I pulled out battered albums, manila envelopes with large prints stuffed in them, yellow and pink paper sleeves with prints tucked into one side and negatives in the other. For a long time I rummaged fruitlessly.

Then, almost by chance, I realised with a jolt that I'd found it – the picture I'd almost unconsciously held in my mind all these years, looking suprisingly similar to my memory of it: a dark-haired girl of roughly my age, captured in front of an expanse of bright green foliage and smiling cryptically at the camera.

Was that a look of surprise? Coyness? Guile? Well, I thought I knew the answer to that. It was good spirits tempered with puzzlement. My family didn't actually know her, and up to the day this picture was taken I'd scarcely even spoken to her. Despite this, she seemed quite willing to be photographed, though she must have been wondering why we would want to photograph *her*.

My father, of course, would have assumed in his innocence that we young people must automatically be socialising with each other – joining in with whatever holiday activities were on offer. He could never have comprehended the shyness and self-doubt that almost prevented me from even speaking to this girl, let alone getting to know her. He simply pointed the camera and clicked – and there she was, printed into our family history book, but not into our lives.

Back in my office I brushed the loft dust off my clothes and looked at the picture again. The colours were a bit faded, but the girl's cream (perhaps originally white) top and blue shorts still stood out against the greenery.

I stared at that cryptic smile. Could she have grown into the woman I saw at Euston? The hair colour was about right, but that didn't necessarily signify anything. The shape of the face also seemed to fit, but I could have been fooling myself about that. I was probably making connections where there simply weren't any – hoping to inject a bit of intrigue into my currently barren love life.

Yet the photograph had already intensified my memories of that time. This was the face that sparked so much in terms of my adolescent emotional life. And rightly or wrongly, that woman at Euston had unquestionably reminded me of her.

Experimentally I placed the picture on the mantelpiece, leaning on the carriage clock that didn't work. That would do for now. See if I still wanted to track her down tomorrow.

See if I still thought this could possibly be the woman I'd seen at the station.

*It felt like a dream, Hawkins reflected: Simon leaning over the map, stabbing at different locations and looking up for acknowledgement; Frank gazing unseeing across the room and drumming his fingers on the corner of the table; Joey pacing back and forth, interrupting frequently; Darren staring pensively into his mug of tea. Did they all think this was really going to happen?*

*Hawkins leaned on the windowsill, watching in disbelief. It felt like a scene from a film. The Lavender Hill Mob? The Italian Job? The Great Train Robbery? Hadn't these people ever watched those films, and noticed what happened in the end? The bad guys always got caught, that's what happened. And someone usually got killed. Why did they think this would end any differently?*

*Simon wanted something from him. He was gesturing indignantly – "Aren't you listening to this, you pillock? You're the one who has to do the driving." He nodded. Of course he was bloody well listening. He needed every last detail to be etched clearly on his brain.*

*He glanced out through the window, across the grey stone wall at the edge of the farmyard and up the sweep of land beyond it. Rain was drizzling down relentlessly. It never seemed to stop raining here. Maybe that was a good sign – a reminder that life had to offer more than this. Wendy said it was raining in the West Country too. Well, with luck it wouldn't be raining where they were going.*

*He turned back to the room. Simon was still running through the plan. "We have to make sure they know we mean business from the start," he was saying. Abruptly Target stepped forward from the back of the room and thrust both arms in front of him. All eyes turned to him, and with a dramatic flourish he racked the slide of an automatic pistol.*

*The metallic clicking sound hung in the silence. He grinned at the assembled company. "These should make the point."*



## Chapter 7

My report on my interview with Rick Ashton was due, and I hadn't even started writing it yet. I'd postponed that refrigeration article yesterday, but this one wouldn't wait.

I pulled out my notes and read them through about five times. The longer I left it to work on jobs like this, the less I remembered about the actual event, and the more reliant I became on what I'd written down. I'd learned that lesson long ago, but too often failed to take account of it.

Grasping for inspiration, I opened Rick's company web site. An item in the *Latest* panel on the home page immediately caught my attention: "Vantage Express to negotiate new funding." It sounded important, yet the story itself had little substance. Clearly Vantage didn't want to reveal the details.

I tried Googling the company instead, and quickly came up with various recent bits of industry analysis. Basically they all said the same thing: the company could be facing a cash flow crisis, and was trying to secure new capital investment.

I stared sourly at the screen. A few years ago I would have been turning up stories like that myself, not reading them secondhand on other people's web sites: evidence if any were needed that I was losing the plot.

To make matters worse, it was now plain that Ashton had skated round this issue when I interviewed him the other day. He must have been rubbing his hands in glee when he realised I knew nothing about it.

I reached for my phone and rang Ashton's PR man, Darren McLeish.

"What can you tell me about this new funding? Has the deal gone through yet?"

"No, we've got several irons in the fire, and the press picked up on it. That's why we went public with it. Normally we wouldn't have announced anything until it was a done deal."

"I should have raised it with Rick the other day."

There was a pause. I could imagine him trying to keep the smile out of his voice. "Yes, we did wonder why you didn't." Quickly he added, "But you covered a lot of other ground between you, so I'm sure you'll have got a good article out of it."

"Hopefully."

I disconnected, irritated by his transparently patronising attitude, and rang Jason Bright at the magazine.

"I just wanted to check what sort of news coverage you're giving to this restructuring deal at Vantage. I don't want my interview piece to conflict with your information."

"No need to mention it in your article, except in passing. I got a statement from Rick Ashton myself this morning, and we'll run a separate news item when the time comes. They're nearly ready to go public, but probably not before we go to press." He hesitated. "Rick said you didn't discuss it with him when you met up."

"No, well there were loads of other things going on at his company. It didn't seem a priority."

This sounded so weak that I was cringing before I'd even finished saying it. Jason evidently thought so too, and said nothing for a moment. My excuse hung limply in the air. Finally he said, "OK, well it sounds as if you've got plenty of other stuff to write about. Bang your article over and we'll see what we can make of it."

\* \* \*

I gazed at my laptop screen, feeling dejected. I couldn't keep messing Jason Bright around like this. Pretty soon he would lose patience with me – and I would lose a large part of my income. What was the matter with me?

I should start on the article immediately, but I also needed to cheer myself up. I opened Google on my laptop and typed in "Fairmile Hotel Falmouth". This was the place where those events in my childhood had played out.

It came up with twenty finds. There were references to the place in articles and blogs, and there was even a postcard of the building for sale on an auction site. However, I couldn't find anything of any substance that had been written directly about it. It had closed twenty-three years ago and been demolished two years later, and somehow all this seemed to have happened in a time frame that search engines found uninteresting.

I sat back, faintly disappointed. There was virtually nothing here that I hadn't seen two years ago. I'd been hoping that new information might have materialised since then, but it appeared not.

I looked again at the list of finds, and focused on the Facebook references. What if I tried contacting people who might have stayed at the hotel around the time we did?

At first sight this didn't look very promising. There were three finds, but they were just scene-setting comments in the person's profile. However, one mention was moderately interesting. "Fond memories of Fairmile – launch pad for lifelong friendships". Nicely resonant, I thought to myself. The woman who had posted this, one Linda Dysart, didn't appear to be my woman, but she might be someone who knew her.

So this could be it: the start of my campaign to find Trina and her parents. Up to now I'd merely been thinking about it; if I reached out and tried to contact this woman, I would be making the pursuit a reality.

I glanced around the screen, wondering if there was any way to find an email address or other contact details for Linda Dysart. Apparently not – but I could send her a friend request. I hesitated a moment, then typed a short message to her. Might as well find out first if she'd accept the request. I clicked the button. I was on my way.

There was a possible shortcut to all this, of course. I could tweet my enquiry, and see what that culled. My Twitter account still had a following of sorts, though interest had lapsed since my investigative articles had tailed off. But something held me back – perhaps a sense that such a solution would be almost too direct, too much of a frontal assault. What if I found these people? How would they feel about having their name and history plastered across the Twittersphere?

No, I preferred to pursue the search on my own terms.

I looked back down at my Rick Ashton notes. Reluctantly I closed the browser window and opened a new Word file. Time to get to work.

\* \* \*

Twenty-four hours later, my article was finished and on its way to Jason Bright, and I'd received a friend request from the woman I'd contacted on Facebook.

I accepted immediately and uploaded a post. "I had a couple of holidays at the Fairmile Hotel outside Falmouth in the late 1980s," I wrote. "You said you used to stay there. Did we ever meet? I'm trying to hook up with some of the other people who were guests at the same time."

I wondered how long she would take to react to this. It could be days. However, I should have realised from her extremely busy and active online presence that she would be more responsive than that. Within an hour a reply had appeared.

"Hello Mike. I think I must have stayed there a few years before you. Did you ever meet Sabrina, Marie M, Danny Boy or Suzi K? I've stayed in touch with some of them ever since."

I replied, "None of the above, I don't think. How about a girl called Trina?"

After a while she came back with, "Afraid not. Must have been after our time. Does anyone else know the name?"

For the time being no one did. Our asynchronous exchange faltered to a halt. I was wondering what else I could do to advance the search when my phone rang. It was Jason Bright.

"Mike, I just wanted to say thanks for the Rick Ashton interview. It reads well."

He sounded sincere, but after my omission of the new funding development I was nervous. Guardedly I said, "Good."

"Yes, useful bit of background to this financial stuff. Fits in well."

I sensed that he had something else on his mind, so I waited.

“The thing is, I wondered if you would fancy a trip to the West Country? I don’t really want to send any of my own guys all that way.”

He was actually offering me more work. Trying not to sound over-eager I said, “Sounds good to me. What’s the deal?”

“I need a feature article on those people near St Austell. Latimer Logistics? Take a camera with you.”

“Expenses paid?”

“The usual.” He hesitated. “Nice rounded piece? Lots of detail? No stone unturned?”

“You’ve got it.”

I disconnected and tossed my phone on to the desk. I couldn’t really blame Jason for telling me to do a good job, even though it rankled. In his shoes I probably wouldn’t have offered me this article in the first place. He’d given me a chance to redeem myself, and I should be grateful.

However, my chagrin over this was easily outweighed by my amazement at the coincidence of this commission. Just as I was obsessing over events that had played out in Cornwall, I was actually being asked to go there. In my world, paid visits to the West Country were few and far between, so this was a remarkable piece of luck.

I opened a map on my screen. St Austell was about fifteen miles short of Truro, the regional capital, and Falmouth was only a few miles further on from there. If I planned things right, I could pay a visit to the Fairmile, or what was left of it.

I phoned the logistics company and made arrangements to see them the following week, then booked myself into a hotel in Truro for two nights. I sat back, feeling pleased with myself. I might not learn anything significant from going there, but at least it would make a change from my normal routine.

As it turned out, I picked up my first clue about my missing family during the trip.

## Chapter 8

Cornwall was further away from London than I remembered. The distance to St Austell turned out to be 270 miles via the motorway route – nearly as far as from London to Newcastle, which had always struck me as a seriously long way. To make matters worse, there were road works on the M4, and it took me well over two hours in my ageing Nissan to complete the first hundred miles past Bristol. At least I'd made an early start.

Traffic on the M5 was much lighter once I'd cleared Weston, and the A30 dual carriageway across the moors from Exeter was eerily and gloriously empty. The holiday season was still a couple of months away, which no doubt helped. The broad undulating wooded vistas lifted my spirits. It was too long since I'd come back to this part of the country.

Latimer Logistics had made its name working for the china clay trade, but had long since switched to general logistics, and now had a massive modern warehouse full of consumer goods.

The Latimer team were friendly and cooperative. They showed me around their extensive site, and allowed me to photograph some of their lime green and blue trucks at the loading bay.

Then they gave me a whistle-stop tour of their modern office complex. I was introduced in passing to various people in different departments without actually picking up their names – unsure as always in this situation whether to act like a visiting celebrity or a diffident guest.

The only person I remembered even vaguely afterwards was an attractive young woman in the marketing department. I warmed instantly to her wry smile. In another life, I thought to myself, I might have tried to find a reason to go back and seek her out.

Eventually I sat down in the boardroom with a couple of the directors to talk, and by the end of the afternoon I had enough notes for an article of twice the length required.

Finally I was able to slip away and drive on to Truro. The hotel radiated olde worlde charm, from its apparently genuine oak beams to the ingrained but not unpleasant smell of cooking – that sense of a million meals past. Its other-worldliness was strangely cheering. I felt almost as if I was on holiday.

\* \* \*

I'd allowed myself the next day off, and after breakfast I drove the fifteen miles from Truro down to Falmouth. My plan was to find the site of the Fairmile Hotel, though this proved harder than I expected. I vaguely remembered the road to the hotel out of Falmouth, but when I found it, nothing about the landscape was even remotely familiar.

After driving around fruitlessly for twenty minutes or so I pulled up outside a small suburban convenience store, and here I immediately struck lucky. The man at the checkout looked more than old enough to remember the hotel, and remarkably enough, did remember it. He took me over to the shop doorway and pointed along the road. "See that new housing estate up there? That's where it was."

"Did you know the people who ran it?"

"The Armitages? I knew them vaguely. Mrs Armitage sometimes came into the shop I used to own." He shrugged philosophically. "That's gone now too."

"Do you know what happened to them?"

"Old Teddy Armitage died a long time before they closed down. Mrs Armitage ran it on her own after that. She had the staff to help her, of course."

"What happened in the end?"

"She died too, and there was no one to take over. The developers moved in."

I looked towards the new houses that were just in view down the road. "We used to have our holidays there. For a couple of years, anyway."

He smiled. "Very nice spot. Lovely gardens. All gone now, of course."

"Do you still see any of the staff? Do you know if any of them live around here?"

“I doubt it. They were mostly young people – students doing holiday jobs, young people here for the surfing up at Newquay. Not many locals.” He looked thoughtful for a moment. “I used to know the head chef. He was a local man. But he died years ago.”

I thanked him for his help, and was walking away towards my car when he called me back. “I tell you who might remember more about the place – Elizabeth Alderley. I think she used to do book-keeping for Mrs Armitage – something like that. She still lives in the big house up the road.”

\* \* \*

The large double-fronted Victorian property was quite close to the new housing estate. I found it easily, but knocked on the front door without any high expectations. However, a woman of about eighty with unruly grey hair and wiry build answered promptly. She was wearing faded jeans and a woollen jacket, and was holding a trowel. I gave her what I hoped was a friendly and unchallenging smile.

“I’m sorry to bother you. Vic at the shop suggested I speak to you. I used to have holidays with my parents at the Fairmile Hotel, and I’m trying to track down some guests we met there. I’m not having much luck.”

“Good gracious. That’s going back.” Her expression relaxed into a smile as she gave me a slightly mischievous once-over. She glanced down at her muddy hands and wiped her forehead with the back of her sleeve. “I’m not sure I should be giving out that sort of information to a complete stranger, assuming I even knew it.” She blew a stray strand of hair out of her eyes.

“Ah, well, I can understand that. I don’t want you to break any confidences.”

I left that remark hanging, and after a moment she said, “Oh, what does it matter? It was all so long ago. What were your friends’ names?”

“That’s the problem. I’m afraid I don’t know. Except for the daughter. She was called Trina, I think. This was about two years before the hotel closed down.”

She seemed to reflect for a moment, but simply shook her head and smiled. “I’m really sorry, that doesn’t ring any bells. It’s a long time ago now.” She looked at me more carefully. “Why do you suddenly want to find them now?”

“It’s a whim really. I’m trying to fill in some gaps in my childhood memories.” I shrugged. “I was visiting the area anyway, so I thought I’d see what was left of the place.”

She smiled wryly at me. “As you can see, the answer is not much.”

“Do you think the hotel records still exist somewhere?”

“Oh no, that’s one thing I do know. There was a fire at the place not long after it closed, and everything went up in flames. I know that, because I intended to go back and sort it out, but the office wing was destroyed.”

I asked if there were any suspicious circumstances.

“Oh, no, it was caused by an electrical fault.”

One way or another, it looked as though I would find little help here in tracking down the missing family.

\* \* \*

I left the woman and drove in towards the town centre, leaving my car in a peripheral car park. The narrow lanes of the old town seemed a world away from the London suburb I’d left yesterday. The gulls’ cries echoed round the whitewashed walls, and a few early-season tourists hovered in front of artisan shop windows. A pall of dampness was drifting in from the sea.

I emerged into the harbour area and leaned over a railing, looking out at the mix of dinghies, yachts and a few fishing boats. Much bigger naval vessels lowered in the distance. The rigging of the nearby vessels clattered in the light breeze. I’d come down here with my parents once or

twice during our holidays; the intense scent of sea air mingled with chip fat took me straight back to that time.

Despite being thwarted in my search for clues about the missing family, I felt strangely revived. The weight of work done or not done seemed to have been lifted temporarily from my shoulders. For the first time, I was starting to understand the depression that had been descending on me for what seemed like years, largely unrecognised and unchecked. Here, it was as if I'd stepped out from under the cloud. I could empty my head of day-to-day concerns, and just drink in the sights and sounds.

I headed for a pub and a lunch of fish and chips.

## Chapter 9

Back in Truro that evening, I considered my options for a meal. I could go out and look for a restaurant in the town, or eat in at the hotel for a second time. In the end I opted for the latter. Its olde worlde charm prevailed.

A party of eight or ten were sitting at a long table opposite me. I had the impression they were a family group, and it was someone's birthday. As my meal progressed I gradually realised my eye was being drawn repeatedly to one of the party – a girl with shoulder-length dark hair, perhaps in her late twenties. She was pretty and animated, and was facing my way. I fancied that occasionally she caught me looking at her, though she didn't seem too discomfited by my attention – perhaps just mildly curious.

Eventually the waiter came over to ask me to sign my bill, and as I was doing so a female voice said, "Hello again." It was the girl from opposite, smiling down at me tentatively. "We met yesterday afternoon at Latimer's. I work in their marketing department."

She had even features, greenish-blue eyes, and a tendency to small dimples when her face creased in a smile, as it had now.

I said, "My god – I'm so sorry. I thought you seemed familiar, but I couldn't think where from." I hoped this sounded plausible.

"You probably see so many transport offices, in the end they all look the same."

"No, no. Not at all. Well, yes." I attempted a smile and lifted my arms in submission. "I didn't recognise you out of context."

She looked down at her loose multi-coloured top and red skirt. "Not my normal workwear, I suppose."

I held out my hand. "Mike Stanhope."

She shook it briefly. "I know. Sally Meadows introduced you to us all."

Sally was personal assistant to Bob Latimer, the managing director, and also seemed to have the unofficial role of head of press liaison.

I said, "Oh god." Inwardly, though, I was still marvelling at the fact that this girl had actually materialised here in front of me tonight.

Her smile widened. "Don't worry, I'm taking advantage. You can tell from the way I'm standing over you while you're sitting down. Gives me the upper hand."

I smiled back at her for a moment. Then a well-built man in his thirties detached himself from her table and walked over. He put his arm casually round her shoulders. "Are you going to introduce us?"

She looked round at him amiably. "Ah, Jack, this is Mike Stanhope, a journalist from London. We met yesterday afternoon. He's doing a feature about Latimer's. Mike, this is Jack, my fiancé."

Of course he was. Had I imagined for one second that she would be single and available? My brain went into overdrive as I struggled to unwind the fantasy relationship I'd already constructed: irrepressible fool.

Her party was in the course of standing up and shuffling their chairs back. She said, "You'll have to excuse us," and they returned to their table. I pushed back my own chair. My two options were the hotel bar or a film on the TV in my room. Neither seemed to hold much appeal.

Then the couple were in front of me again. "Some of us are hanging on for a while in the bar," the girl said. "Would you care to join us?"

"Are you sure? I wouldn't want to intrude."

She smiled. "You're in Cornwall now. Time to experience a bit of Cornish hospitality."

\* \* \*

Five of her party came through to the bar and gathered at the counter. I made a weak attempt to pay for the first round, but it turned out they had already started a tab.

It was her father's birthday, and he smiled benignly at the assembled company, sipping his brandy. I felt sure he would have been waving a cigar if it had been permitted. He was around sixty-five with a reddish complexion, slightly heavy features and thinning brushed-back hair.

The girl turned to me. "Mike, let me introduce you. Gordon Renwick, my father. Mary, my mother. Ben, my uncle. And you already know Jack."

"I'm ashamed to admit I don't know your own name."

"No shame in it. You wouldn't remember such intimacies from yesterday. I'm Ashley."

"Pleased to meet you, Ashley." I held my hand out and she shook it for a second time. Her hand was warm, her grip brief but confident.

For a while I found myself chatting to Uncle Ben, a retired sales manager. Then it was the turn of fiancé Jack, who managed a sports equipment shop in the town. Next on my list would have been Ashley's mother, who was currently deep in conversation with Ben. She had a carrying voice, and I had the impression she could be quite intimidating.

However, Ashley now turned to me. "What have you been up to today, Mike? Sampling the joys of life in the duchy of Cornwall?"

"Well, I went down to Falmouth this morning."

"Ha! We used to live there. What were you doing? Another interview for your paper?"

"No ..." I broke off, wondering what to tell them, then decided the truth wouldn't hurt. "I went there on a whim, actually. I was trying to track down a place where I spent a couple of holidays in my childhood." I paused. "But it was pulled down and replaced by a housing estate, so there wasn't much to see."

"You must mean the Fairmile. Was that it?"

I nodded.

"That's amazing!" Over her shoulder she said, "Mike used to stay at the Fairmile!" She turned back to me. "But what on earth made you go there now?"

"It probably sounds daft. I just had a fancy to track down some people we used to see when we were staying there."

She seemed intrigued. "Who? We might know them. Me and my brother Patrick used to play there sometimes. My dad knew the owner, Peggy Armitage."

I was still recovering from my astonishment that these people actually knew some of the near-mythological characters from my childhood – were trotting out names as though there were nothing remotely remarkable about them. But what should I tell them about my search for the missing family? I decided I'd keep it simple.

"To be honest, I was trying to track down a girl who stayed there. It probably sounds a bit weird now, but obviously we were both about the same age. I just wondered what became of her."

A beam spread over Ashley's face. "So what was this girl's name? No need to be coy."

"Trina. I think that's what it was."

Amazingly, she immediately said, "Yes! I remember Trina." She looked upward, scanning her memory bank. "Tall girl. Dark hair. Bubbly personality. Mind you, I was only about six. Everybody seemed tall to me then."

I stood there marvelling. Apart from that single photograph, this was my first evidence that the mystery girl and her family had ever even existed.

"You've got a good memory, if you were as young as that."

"She made an impression on me. I liked her, so I always remembered her."

"Did you know her surname?"

"Marsh? Something like that?" She turned to her father. "Do you remember a girl at the Fairmile called Trina? Very lively personality. What was her surname? Was it Marsh?"

"Unusual first name." He squinted for a moment. "Trina Markham. Daughter of Desmond Markham. Must be her."

I turned my attention to him. "Do you know where they were from?"



He shook his head. “Sorry, no idea. Peggy Armitage used to introduce us to guests at the hotel sometimes, but it was all very fleeting. I’m amazed that I even remember Desmond.” He drained his brandy glass and placed it with emphasis on the bar, then turned away and engaged Jack in conversation. Evidently the conversation was closed.

I turned back to Ashley. “Well, I think that’s truly remarkable. This is practically the first concrete evidence I’ve found that she existed at all.”

“So you didn’t keep in touch with her at the time?”

I shook my head. “I was a tongue-tied youth. We only knew each other slightly. Keeping in touch wasn’t on the agenda.”

I heard myself hesitate as I said this. Keeping in touch had certainly been on my agenda, for a while at least, but evidently it hadn’t been on hers. It seemed inappropriate to mention it now.

She looked at me questioningly. I said, “OK, so why am I chasing her up in that case? Well, it’s a long story. I’ll happily tell it to you some time, but this probably isn’t the right occasion.”

She gave me a teasing smile. “So you think you and I going to stay in touch, do you?”

*end of sample content*

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