

Deficit of Diligence

Peter Rowlands

(Chapters 1-10)

Topham Publishing

Deficit of Diligence

© Peter Rowlands 2016. All rights reserved.

Topham Publishing, London

www.tophampublishing.com

Peter Rowlands has asserted his right under the Design and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This is a work of fiction. All characters are imaginary, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. Certain real organisations and locations are mentioned, but all characters, events and activities relating to them are entirely fictitious.

No part of this book may be reproduced or stored in a retrieval system, existing or yet to be invented, whether printed, digital or analogue, or be transmitted in any form or by any means, whether electronic, mechanical, wireless, optical or using voice or data recording, save in the form of short extracts for review, without the express written permission of the author.

Build 1q

Foreword

Deficit of Diligence can be read as a free-standing novel, but in fact it's the second book in a series about the leading character, Mike Stanhope, and it contains revelations that might spoil your enjoyment of the first book, [Alternative Outcome](#). If you haven't already read that book, you might prefer to start there and experience the story from the beginning.

To Fleur. Ever supportive and encouraging.

Chapter 1

I was wrenched out of sleep by my phone. As I groped for it I lifted the edge of the bedroom curtain. A brilliant summer's morning splashed in. I could feel the warmth in it. Blinking, I let the curtain fall. After six months I still found the quality of Cornish light extraordinary. It really did seem more intense than the London daylight I was accustomed to.

I held the phone to my ear. "You're still in bed!" Ashley's mirthful accusation instantly made me smile. Could she somehow see me from her hotel in London?

"No I'm not."

"Freelancers. You should try working a full day for once like the rest of us."

Nine to five was exactly what I was avoiding. I'd already done that in my previous existence. Ashley's employer, Latimer Logistics, had suggested more than once that I start working for them full time, instead of charging them fees for the writing jobs I did for them. I wasn't ready.

"You've got a letter. I meant to tell you when I called you last night."

She meant she'd retrieved it from my house in south London. I'd forgotten to renew the redirection mandate, so mail was stacking up there. I'd put the place on the market after moving to Truro late last year, and had recently agreed a sale, but I still had the keys. Ashley had volunteered to go and check it over while she was at her marketing conference in the West End.

Receiving a letter was hardly momentous news, but from her tone I sensed that it might be more than just a bill. I said, "What sort of letter?"

"It's from a firm of solicitors, according to the envelope. Green and Bavistock. Ring any bells?"

"Not that I know of."

"Want me to open it?"

"Please."

There was a pause. "Dear Mr Stanhope, we have been trying to reach you in connection with the estate of the late Miss Elizabeth Sanderson, etcetera etcetera." Another pause. "Would you kindly contact the undersigned at your earliest convenience." She broke off. "Did you know a Miss Elizabeth Sanderson?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, sounds as if she knew you. Do you think she remembered you in her will?"

"That kind of luck doesn't happen to me."

"Maybe your luck has changed."

* * *

It was a strange reversal, Ashley being in London and me being in Cornwall. We'd met the previous year through our mutual involvement in the world of logistics – in her case through her job as marketing executive with a transport and warehousing company near Truro, in mine as a journalist in London. We gradually got together, but it was plain that she had little inclination to leave the West Country. Instead, I decided to sell my house, leave London and rent a flat in Truro – nearly three hundred miles to the west, and just a few minutes' drive from Ashley's own tiny flat. It seemed radical, yet the way I saw it I had nothing to lose and plenty to gain.

Half a year later our relationship still felt fresh and new. By contrast, my marriage and previous life seemed drab and directionless. Back then I was on the road to nowhere. Now I was definitely on the road to somewhere, although I wasn't sure exactly where.

That uncertainty was brought home to me as I lifted the lid of my laptop. Three activities were still on the screen from yesterday evening, and they seemed to sum up my current state of indecision. One was a draft of a routine press release I'd written on behalf of Latimer Logistics: workmanlike but pedestrian. Another was the first six paragraphs of a freelance article I was writing for a forklift truck magazine. Even I found this boring.

The third window on screen was the beginning of my new novel, but this was very much an outside bet. My first novel, which I'd self-published as an e-book the year before, hadn't yet sold even a hundred copies, but I still nurtured hopes of pushing it to a wider audience. The problem was finding the right way to market it. Self-publishing, I now knew, was a minefield of conflicting advice and relentless online graft. The web seemed rife with online forums where would-be writers took delight in warning of the pitfalls. Yet the hassle hadn't curbed my desire to write a second book. It might still be the way to turn the corner to recognition.

I shrugged. I would think about this some other time. More pressing was the question of whether or not I was still fundamentally a journalist. I felt I was being drawn ever deeper into the Latimer fold, but how far was I prepared to let that go? It was certainly tempting: more money, much more security, and a sense of belonging. But I wasn't quite ready to stop being a journalist yet, despite a recent lack of substantial commissions. It felt too much like compromise. And I certainly wasn't about to give up on my idea of becoming a novelist.

I was still debating which of the three activities should take priority today when my phone rang again.

"Mike, it's Bob Latimer. Is today one of your days for coming into the office?"

The company's headquarters were in St Austell, fifteen miles away. A tiny room had been allocated to me in the main office building, but I tried to limit my visits. I didn't want the staff to see me as a permanent fixture, and I wasn't really comfortable working there. It felt wrong somehow to spend time on any activity that wasn't related to Latimers.

I answered, "Not strictly speaking."

"Ah. Well would you be free to come over anyway? I wanted to run something past you."

It was a request that couldn't be denied. Bob, the chief executive and grandson of the founder, had been strongly supportive when I moved to Truro, increasing the amount of freelance work his firm gave me and making the room available when I wanted it. His tone was nearly always genial, but I'd learned that this shouldn't be confused with mildness of manner or lack of purpose. Invitations from him were almost instructions, and I felt I owed him enough to take this one as such.

I told him, "I'm on my way."

* * *

On a good day I enjoyed the drive to St Austell. Despite being the main route out of Truro towards Plymouth and points east, it was mostly just a busy single-carriageway road, flanked for much of the way by hedgerows and fields. Today it all looked gleaming and picture-postcard perfect, and reminded me why I was glad to be in Cornwall.

Bob Latimer closed his office door behind me and ushered me into a visitor's chair, taking a seat behind his desk.

"It's about Mellings," he said, unusually diffident. He was slim in build, somewhere in his mid-forties but perennially boyish in appearance. He brushed his slightly overlong dark hair back through his fingers.

I nodded expectantly, wondering where this was heading. Bob's company, Latimer Logistics, was a substantial family-owned business with headquarters in Cornwall and depots in various other cities. Its core business was storing and delivering goods, and it had hundreds of thousands of square feet of warehousing in St Austell and elsewhere, along with a sizeable fleet of trucks. I'd cut my teeth writing articles about such companies, and these days I was using that experience to write for, rather than about, this one.

Melling Logistics was a smaller but well-established business in north-east England, and Bob's company had just taken it over, gaining a presence in a new area. I'd had to prepare several press releases about the acquisition. Bob himself had been shuttling up and down the country for several months to seal the deal, usually taking various colleagues with him.

I said, "Things are all going to plan, are they?"

“So far so good. It’s an exciting time.” He smiled, still with that diffident air, then cleared his throat. “How would you feel about spending a week or two up there?”

I gave him what I hoped was a willing but slightly puzzled smile. “Doing what?”

“Good question.” He glanced briefly out of the window at the forecourt of the office block, perhaps seeking inspiration in the bays where staff and visitors parked. Turning back to me he said, “I suppose you could call it liaison.”

Clearly there was more. I waited.

“Where we’re at with all this is that Mellings have signed a letter of intent, and we’re waiting for due diligence to complete. Our lawyers are busy doing their stuff. In other words, the deal has gone through in principle, but we haven’t signed our names on the dotted line yet.”

I nodded. I had a vague idea what “due diligence” meant – something to do with lawyers and accountants checking that the acquired asset was really worth what the sellers claimed, and was free of undisclosed debts and obligations.

“So while that’s all going on, I’m sending Jamie and Andrea up there to maintain an on-the-spot presence. They’ll be able to get a handle on how Mellings run things at a practical level – operational management, customer account handling, that sort of thing. Eventually we’ll need to integrate all that with what we do here.”

Jamie worked in Latimers’ operations department, which meant he was involved in the day-to-day running of the company. Andrea was in accounts. I knew them both slightly. I gave Bob a quizzical look.

“They’re both quite young,” he said, “and more to the point, they’re in a mutual relationship. I don’t think I’m breaking any confidences in telling you that.”

I could hardly express any negative views about this. Ashley and I were in a similar situation.

He continued, “So basically, I don’t want them to think I’m sending them on an expenses-paid holiday to the party capital of the North East.” He gave me an ironic smile. “Ostensibly you would be there to progress the press and marketing aspects, but actually you would be keeping an eye on them as well.”

“Why me?”

“Ah, well.” He sat back and stretched, clasping his hands behind his head. “Brian is on sick leave and Charles’s wife has just had given birth. I can’t expect him to travel. And I can’t ask Gareth to go again either. He’s already done three trips.” Brian Wells and Charles Cornish were two of Bob’s co-directors, and Gareth Hobbs was the recently-appointed sales manager. I’d only seen him briefly on a couple of occasions; up to now he seemed to have spent more time on the Melling project than in the office.

“Besides,” Bob said, “you have exactly the right range of qualities for this. I don’t know why I didn’t think of you before.”

I resisted asking what those qualities were. “But I’m not even on Latimers’ staff.”

He waved this away with a generous sweep of the hand. “I think you’ve earned your place on our team in the past half-year, Mike. People here respect you. Obviously I’ll pay you a proper daily rate and all expenses, and if you have freelance work to do, you can keep on doing it while you’re up there.”

I caught him in an inscrutable smile, and smiled back at him, curious. “And there’s something else?”

He leaned forward slightly. “Well, being an outsider has its advantages. You’re not in the management hierarchy. You’re an unknown quantity. That could help when it comes to interacting with Mellings.”

“You have reservations about them?”

“No, not at all. You’ll enjoy working with Chris Melling. I just want to make it clear to him and his team that the rules have changed. They’re no longer calling all the shots. That’s really what this whole visit is about – having an ongoing presence there on the ground.”

“He might be a bit guarded with me. We know each other vaguely, and he already knows I have a separate life as a journalist.”

“So be it.” Another smile. “I see this as a bit of practical psychology.” He sat back. “So what do you think?”

Chapter 2

“You should go.” Ashley was uncompromisingly positive when she phoned me that evening from her conference hotel in Bloomsbury. “You’ll earn brownie points with Bob, and you’ll enjoy it. It’ll be a good experience.”

“But he wants me to leave on Thursday. I won’t see you before you get back from London.”

I could hear the plangent tone in my voice, but after half a year in Cornwall I still didn’t like being separated from Ashley. I could hardly believe my luck in getting together with her in the first place, or work out what she saw in me. The spark between us had been obvious from the moment we met, but it was still a wonder to me that she’d chosen me over her fiancé. She brought so many things to our relationship that had been missing from my marriage.

“How long does he want you to spend up there?”

“It’s a bit open-ended. Maybe a couple of weeks, to start with.”

“But surely you can come back at weekends?”

“I suppose so, but it’ll be hell of a long journey. Anyway, not this first weekend. He wants me to go to some social event that the company is putting on.”

“It’ll be fun. Newcastle is a place with a real buzz these days – that’s what I hear.”

“I don’t think I’m very good with enforced exile.”

“Maybe I could come and visit you.”

“Ha! You’d have to ask Bob Latimer about that. One of the reasons he’s sending me is to make sure Jamie and Andrea don’t treat the whole trip as an expenses-paid sex binge.”

She chuckled softly. “Listen to you. When did you get to be so old?”

Ashley was nearly eight years younger than me, but I didn’t like being reminded of it. I said, “This is Bob talking, not me.”

“Yeah yeah.”

There was a pause, then she said, “What about those solicitors – the ones who wrote to you?”

“What about them?”

“Well, I think they were based somewhere in the north. You could actually go and see them. Let me get the letter.” I could hear her rummaging around. “Ha! It’s St Mary’s Place, Newcastle upon Tyne. There you go. Couldn’t be more appropriate.”

* * *

So come next morning I was poring over maps on my laptop, trying to get a sense of the distance from Truro to Newcastle. As I’d thought, by UK standards Newcastle seemed impossibly far away: more than four hundred and fifty miles by road. The route was fast and relatively straightforward, but you could never rule out traffic delays and road works. According to the computer, it would take well over seven hours to drive it.

I phoned Sally Meadows, Bob Latimer’s personal assistant. “How does Bob normally get to Newcastle from here?”

“Sometimes he flies. Sometimes he gets the train. There’s no quick solution, unfortunately.”

“Are there any direct flights from Newquay?” This was my favoured option. Newquay was not far from Truro.

“Possibly, but if so they’re very infrequent. Bob’s never tried it.”

“Oh. Where does he fly from then?”

“Exeter.”

“But that must be a hundred miles away!”

She laughed. “It’s about ninety from where you are, Mike. Welcome to the realities of living in Cornwall.”

When I said nothing, she added, “Take my advice, Mike – go by train and rent a car when you get there. Far less hassle than doing it any other way.”

My next call was to the firm of solicitors in Newcastle. Ashley had read out the phone number from their letter, and I soon found myself talking to one of the partners.

“I can’t tell you much on the phone,” he said. I was aware of the refined but unmistakable Geordie accent – something that would become very familiar to me in the following weeks. “In essence, Elizabeth Sanderson lived alone in Harrogate. She had a house there. She wasn’t very old – early seventies, I think – but I believe she was suffering from a long-term disease.”

“Harrogate? But you’re in Newcastle. Not exactly just round the corner.”

“No doubt that aspect is buried in the history.”

“But what’s the connection? Why did you need to make contact with me?”

“You’re mentioned in her will. I think I can safely tell you that much.”

Confirmation, then, of Ashley’s assumption. I wondered how far I could push my luck. “Is this a substantial bequest that we’re talking about?”

“That’s something I really can’t get into on the phone.”

“So how does this work? Will there be an official reading?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. Once we get the formalities out of the way I’ll be able to put you in the picture. Coming here in person is a good idea – it should save on some of the correspondence. You’ll need to bring various bits of identification with you. I’ll email you the details.”

Last on my list of calls was Chris Melling, who had founded Melling Logistics twenty-five years before. I’d interviewed him once for an article about his company, and found him relaxed and personable. But that was when he was calling the shots – telling me only what he wanted me to hear. How would he feel, knowing I represented the acquisition team, and might report anything I picked up directly back to Bob Latimer?

“Mike, I understand you’re going to grace us with your presence.” Wry and smoothly affable.

“I hope that’s all right with you?”

“Of course. Delighted to have you with us. We’ve already found you and your colleagues a room to work in while you’re here.”

“I appreciate it.”

“And we’ve got you booked into the hotel we normally use. It’s a nice little place. I think you’ll like it.”

“Great, thank you.” I hesitated. “Bob thought we could come to your event on Saturday night. Is that all right, or is it going to cause any problems? It seems a bit of a cheek, inviting ourselves along.”

“Of course it’s all right. I told Bob that. You’ll all be very welcome.” His Newcastle accent was more pronounced than the solicitor’s had been, and also subtly different, even to my untutored ear.

“I’ll look forward to seeing you on Friday.”

* * *

In the afternoon I drove over to St Austell again. I wanted to strike the right note with Jamie Andrews and Andrea Smith before we all embarked on this expedition.

Jamie seemed relaxed about my involvement. He waved me to a chair next to his desk in the operations room and offered me a coffee. There was a subdued buzz in the open-plan office. Half a dozen people sat at computers, many talking on the phone with suppressed urgency, while others wandered in and out or chatted in earnest tones. Through the windows, the corrugated metal wall of one of the company’s vast grey warehouses loomed.

Jamie was in his late twenties, with a smooth olive complexion and dark eyes. It was almost a Mediterranean look, though his accent seemed slightly Scottish. He asked me, “What will you be doing up at Mellings, actually?”

Was he expecting me to say “babysitting you”, or was he genuinely curious? I thought I’d better seem frank. “I’m not quite sure, to be honest. I’m planning on playing it by ear.”

“Lucky you. I thought I was getting a holiday, but it sounds as if you really are.” He gave me a quick smile to show he wasn’t serious about the holiday: a neat double bluff in view of what Bob Latimer had said.

“Don’t count on it. I’ve got plenty of work to keep up with, quite apart from researching what makes Mellings tick.”

Andrea was less forgiving when I wandered through to the accounts department. She asked me, “Do you really know enough about Latimers yet to lead a team like this?”

“I’m not leading anything. I’m just tagging along.”

“That’s not what Bob Latimer said. He told us you’re in charge.”

I wasn’t going to contradict Bob, but I didn’t want her to feel resentful either. “I think we’ll all need to keep an open mind.”

She nodded briskly. She seemed about the same age as Jamie, and was also dark-complexioned. They looked quite alike.

“I’m not planning on cramping your style, honestly.”

She flushed slightly at this. Clearly I was treading on dangerous ground. Hastily I said, “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good. Me too.” She sat down at her computer with a curt smile and started clicking at something with her mouse. Evidently the conversation was closed.

* * *

Ashley took a robust view of all this when I spoke to her on the phone again that evening. “Just ignore Andrea,” she advised.

“I suppose I can try.”

“I’ve never really got on with her. Brittle personality, inclined to be moody. I don’t understand what Jamie sees in her.”

“She’s attractive. That might have something to do with it.”

“Oh yes? Says who?”

I laughed. “I’m beginning to wonder what I’ve let myself in for.”

“Jamie’s all right. I think you’ll like him.”

There was a pause, then Ashley said, “I’m sorry you’ll have left by the time I get back there.” She wasn’t given to frequent professions of fondness, so I took this to heart.

“Me too. But I’ll see you soon.”

What I didn’t know was the tangle I’d be stepping into by the time that happened.

Chapter 3

“So, Mike. Good trip?” Chris Melling smiled amiably at me.

He had a bright, airy office on the second floor of his company’s office block, with windows on two sides overlooking a service road flanked by neat lawns. Mellings was by far the largest occupant in the modest business park, which was on the western fringe of Newcastle, about a mile north of the River Tyne.

I shifted in my chair. “Not bad.” In fact, the journey to Newcastle the previous day had been long and frustrating; delays had expanded the eight hours on the train to a door-to-door time of well over ten.

“The train’s pretty slow, from what I hear,” Chris said. “I’ve never done the whole journey by rail.”

“It seems to crawl on the cross-country section.”

Chris was somewhere in his late fifties, with a lined face and a good head of light-coloured hair tinged with grey. He was wearing a pale suit and an improbable lime green tie. He smoothed it down a little self-consciously, assessing me.

“You’ve changed horses, Mike.” Another smile, this time accompanied by a slightly puzzled look. “The last I heard, you were a journalist writing feature articles in the weekly trade press. Now you’re working for Latimers and living in the West Country. A bit of switch for you, no?”

“Long story.” I wasn’t sure what he knew and what he was expecting. “I’m not actually employed by Latimers, I just handle their editorial work. Bob probably told you that.” I thought some more. “For present purposes I also seem to be some sort of emissary.” I gave him what I hoped was a self-deprecating smile. “I still have a separate life as a journalist.”

“A hotbed of transport interest, is it, Cornwall?” He managed to give that sentence a peculiarly Geordie lilt, especially the “is it”, injected as a parenthetical throw-away.

“You’ve probably heard of the internet. Allows you to work anywhere you like.”

He laughed. “Until you have to travel in the real world.”

“Touché.”

He leaned forward. “So if you pick up any interesting titbits of information about Mellings while you’re here, should I expect to be reading about them online before the day is out?” He was still smiling, but I could feel an edge to his words.

“Of course not. I’m here on behalf of Latimers. That should be understood.”

“Just so long as I know how the land lies.” He stood up. “I’ll come and find you later on and give you a guided tour.”

* * *

I wandered through to the room we’d been allocated. It was in the executive corridor, a couple of doors down from Chris’s office. Ostensibly this gave it some status, but I suspected the choice had been made primarily so that Chris could keep an eye on us. There was certainly nothing impressive about room itself; it was quite small and spartan, containing just three desks and a table.

Jamie and Andrea hadn’t arrived in Newcastle yet. Bob Latimer had kept them back a day while Andrea’s team completed an urgent forecasting project. They were planning on driving the whole way together in Jamie’s car, which they reckoned would give them more freedom of movement while we were all here. Latimers were only prepared to stump up for one shared rental car, and I’d claimed that.

I sat down at the desk I’d chosen for myself, next to the window. My first self-imposed task of the day was to contact the firm of solicitors who had written to me about the unexpected bequest.

“I’m glad you called, Mr Stanhope. There’s been a development that I need to talk to you about.” I detected a slightly ominous tone.

“Development?”

“I’ll put you in the picture when we meet. Would Monday morning suit you?”

My second task was to contact the Newcastle-based public relations firm used by Melling Logistics. My two previous phone conversations with their boss, Hugh Collins, had been awkward. He probably thought Latimers planned to fire him and give Mellings’ PR work to me, but equally I was aware that he could put in a bid to handle all the expanded Latimer group’s PR work, including mine.

Hugh picked up on the first ring, and cautiously agreed to meet me later on Monday morning at his office in Jesmond, a suburb north of the city centre. Slightly relieved, I disconnected and opened my laptop. My unfinished forklift truck article beckoned.

* * *

Chris Melling thrust his head round my door at midday. “Ready for the guided tour?”

In fact I’d had a similar tour four or five years ago, when I’d come here to write an article about the company, so it was familiar ground. I had to admit to myself, however, that I remembered few of the staff and none of the details.

Mellings’ offices adjoined the main warehouse. The complex included not only extensive and cavernous areas of racked goods, but also a high-ceilinged assembly and re-working area. Chris and I stood on a balcony, looking down on the conveyors and workstations arrayed on the concrete floor. We watched people assembling cartons, inserting goods in them and feeding them through shrink-wrapping machines.

“It gets much busier than this at peak,” Chris said. “This is our quiet time.” I knew from experience that peak meant the peak season – the long run-up to Christmas.

He led me down a clanging metal stair to meet the section leader, a capable-looking woman called Mary. As we spoke she kept glancing over my shoulder at the activity beyond me, presumably reluctant to be distracted. I tried to pitch in a few informed questions about her job, and eventually felt I’d convinced her I actually knew something about the business.

“I hope you enjoy your stay with us, Mike,” she said in the end, giving me an unexpectedly warm smile.

Greg Atkins, one of Chris’s co-directors, proved a harder nut to crack. When Chris took me through to his office adjacent to the packing floor, his handshake was perfunctory. “I’ve seen your articles,” he said with a hint of disdain, and if a mere nodding acquaintance with them had somehow tainted him. It was a surprisingly confrontational greeting, and I glanced at Chris, bemused.

Chris merely smiled blandly. “Mike has promised he’s off duty while he’s here with us.”

I turned to Greg, a tall, well-built man with a roundish face and slightly receding curly hair. He said, “Very glad to hear it.” Unlike Chris, he had a southern accent – perhaps from the West Midlands. “So what will you be getting up to while you’re here, Mike?”

The question itself was mild enough, but the tone held an edge of sarcasm. Why was he trying to intimidate me? Fighting a sense of indignation, I met his gaze as squarely as I could. “What would you like me to be doing?”

He gave an exaggerated shrug. “It’s your show. I’m sure you have your agenda.”

Chris chipped in, “It’s a fact-finding and liaison visit, isn’t that right, Mike?”

“On the nail.” Turning to Greg, I said a little recklessly, “It’s already proving quite illuminating.” If he wanted to be hostile, I couldn’t resist giving him something to think about.

He looked ready to say more, but merely nodded as if he’d expected no less.

* * *

“Greg is a good man,” Chris said as we headed back towards his office. “He’s inclined to be a bit protective of what we do here.”

“But surely Bob Latimer has made it clear that he wants to keep all your key staff on the payroll? No one will be out of a job.”

“Of course. But you know what people are like. Loyalty can be a commendable quality.”

As we parted company in the corridor I asked him, “Your event tomorrow night – what’s the format?”

“It’s just a dinner in a nice hotel. It’s a thank-you to the staff for their work through the year. We’re always too busy to do it at Christmas. And we usually have a bit of dancing afterwards, for anyone who wants it.” He turned to me and swivelled his hips in a parody of a dance move. It looked slightly absurd, but he accompanied it with a winning smile.

“Any dress code?”

“Well, some of us like to put on our best frocks, but just come as you are.”

Chapter 4

Chris had placed me next to him at the dinner. It was either a mark of honour or a ruse to prevent me fraternising too freely with anyone who might bad-mouth the company after their fourth glass of Pinot Noir.

I looked round at the other circular tables, each of which seated a dozen people. There seemed to be a director or manager on many of them: very egalitarian. Subdued pop music trickled from a disco that had been set up at the end of the room: presumably a taster of something more animated to come.

I turned to Chris. "This must be costing you a fortune."

He grinned. "Not really – not for the good will it engenders. Surely Bob Latimer must do something like this down at St Austell, doesn't he?"

"I don't know, to be honest. Not since I've been there."

"If not, he should take a leaf out of our book."

At the end of the meal Chris called for silence by rattling a spoon against a glass, then rose and gave a short speech. There was little of substance in it, but he talked enthusiastically about the takeover by Latimers, and introduced me by name. Jamie and Andrea were merely described as "Mike's colleagues".

People started moving around, gathering themselves into new ad hoc groupings. I made my way over to Jamie and Andrea's table. They'd arrived in Newcastle late the previous evening, but had kept a low profile all day, so we'd barely spoken until we piled into a taxi from our small country hotel.

"I like the way Chris Melling gave you the name check," Andrea greeted me, making it clear that she didn't. "We do the grafting, but Mr Public Relations gets the credit." She gave me a wide-eyed smile to take some of the sting out of her words.

"You can't blame Mike for that," Jamie said quickly. "He didn't write Chris Melling's script."

"No, but it's so predictable, isn't it?"

I shrugged. The pair had barely spoken to each other on the journey over here, and Andrea's animosity apparently extended to anyone who came within her range. I'd eventually worked out that Jamie had taken a wrong turn somewhere en route from Cornwall, adding half an hour to their journey time, and she hadn't yet forgiven him. Nothing like that had happened between me and Ashley so far, but even if it had, I couldn't envisage her reacting like this, or imagine how I would have responded if she had. Not with Jamie's tolerant smile, I suspected.

I sat down at the table. "I suppose we ought to have a meeting on Monday morning, to work out what we're all doing."

"Jamie and I already know what we're doing," Andrea said. "No need to discuss anything."

Patently, I said, "Well, I don't, so it's still worth coordinating, don't you think?"

Jamie quickly said, "Good idea. Then we'll all be singing off the same hymn sheet."

"Something like that."

Before the conversation could go any further the volume of the disco rose abruptly. Chris Melling emerged into a clear area of floor with his wife Sheila and they started dancing. It was a restrained jive, and they were good at it. We watched for a while, then one or two other couples joined them. Andrea grabbed Jamie's hand. "Come on then," she said brightly. "Let's show them how it's done."

Now alone at the table, I continued to watch the dancing. You never knew who would be good at it until you saw them doing it. Andrea was instinctively rhythmical and inventive, and Jamie's performance was passable. They worked well as a couple. Mellings also had its crop of local talent. I could see now why the event was so popular. I felt out of place, and wished Ashley were here.

“Not dancing then, Mike?” It was female voice, speaking loudly in order to be heard over the music. I was aware of a slightly exaggerated Geordie accent. I turned to find a blonde woman smiling down at me with a challenge in her eyes. She looked about thirty, and had straight shoulder-length hair that curled slightly inwards: a considered period style. She was wearing a short cream-coloured jacket and an aquamarine skirt.

I raised my arms. “Evidently not.”

“Shove up then.” She pulled out the chair next to mine and sat down, holding out her hand for me to shake. “Jenna Melling.”

“Melling. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“Afraid not. Chris Melling is my dad.” She smiled in mock chagrin. “Never let it be said that nepotism is dead.”

“You work at the firm then?” I didn’t recall hearing any mention of her until now.

“I did once. Then I saw the error of my ways and went freelance. Now I just offer them the benefit of my wisdom for a fee.” More of the exaggerated Geordie.

I looked at her. The expression I saw was mischievous, but I also sensed calculation behind her eyes. I said, “Freelance what?”

“Marketing consultant. But most of my work now is for Ashurst Concepts.”

I raised my eyebrows. Clearly I was supposed to recognise the name.

She said, “Your wife doesn’t have a spiralizer, then?”

“I don’t have a wife or a spiralizer.”

“It was last year’s big culinary sensation – or was it the year before’s? Anyway, Ashurst imports electrical goods, and Mellings do their distribution.”

“Very fitting.”

“It is, isn’t it?” She seemed about to say more, but at that moment a new record started playing and she changed her mind. “Do you fancy a twirl?”

We managed to acquit ourselves adequately on the dance floor in a classic disconnected bop, then the music slowed and we moved into a more dancier hold. Jenna was the first woman I’d taken into any sort of embrace since meeting Ashley more than a year ago – and probably since long before that. Oddly, however, my familiarity with Ashley seemed to give me confidence with this woman. That strange piece of logic made me uncomfortable, yet it didn’t stop me experiencing a momentary frisson as we were pressed together by other dancers.

It seemed like time to quit. As soon as I decently could, I told her I was ready to sit down. “Chicken!” she complained, casting around for a replacement partner. Greg Atkins happened to be passing, and she pounced on him. “Come on Greg, let’s show them what this dance should really look like.”

I watched them for a while from the table. Greg danced with his eyes closed, while Jenna’s darted around the room, animated and inscrutable.

* * *

The event broke up some time after eleven o’clock, and I shared a taxi again with Andrea and Jamie, who seemed to be on good terms at last. The three of us made it back at our small hotel by half past midnight – not too late for me to phone Ashley, who had returned from her marketing conference late the previous day.

“How’s Cornwall?”

“It seems to have survived without me. What about Geordie Land?”

“I haven’t seen much of it yet, except for a logistics depot, and they all look more or less the same.”

“Nice people?”

“They seem to be. But I still don’t really know what I’m doing here.”

“You’ll probably work it out eventually.”

“I suppose so.”

“How was the dinner?”

“OK.” I reflected for a moment. “I met a temptress while I was there. Chris Melling’s daughter Jenna.”

“Ha. She used to run their marketing department years ago, but she was too young really. I met her at one or two trade shows, but then I lost track of her. I suppose she’s grown up a bit now, but temptress is right. You could see that in her even then. You need to steer clear of that woman, Mr Stanhope.”

“I wish you’d been there.”

“Sounds as if I should have been.”

Chapter 5

Green & Bavistock, solicitors, were based in St Mary's Place, not far from the Haymarket in Newcastle's city centre. Most of the other premises in the elegant Georgian terrace seemed to be taken up incongruously by fast food outlets or accommodation agencies. Across the road, an elaborate coronet topping the 1960s civic centre loomed from amid trees and lawns.

"There used to be solicitors or professional firms all the way along this stretch of road," David Smythe told me from behind his mahogany desk. "Now there are only a few of us left. All the rest is geared up for council workers and students."

He looked about sixty, and had a fleshy, reddish face and brushed-back grey hair. He pulled a manila file towards him on the desk without opening it. "You were not acquainted with Elizabeth Sanderson, I gather?"

"I'd never even heard of her until you wrote to me."

"*Ah-ha*," he acknowledged absently, placing the accent on the initial "Ah". I was gradually getting used to this Geordie expression of assent, though in situations like this it still came over as oddly informal. "That's what I thought."

He opened the file, then closed it again. "Elizabeth Sanderson died a few weeks ago. We are her executors, and you are named in her will." He scratched his head. "In fact you are the prime beneficiary. In a nutshell, she wanted you to have almost everything."

I flashed him a look of surprise. He merely smiled noncommittally, so I said, "What in fact is 'everything'?"

"Well, there's a freehold house in Harrogate – quite a substantial property – plus all the furniture and effects in it, and quite a bit of money in savings and investments. Some of the antique furniture could be quite valuable. The house is mortgage-free." He opened the file once again, pulled out a thin sheaf of pages and slid them over to me. "It's all detailed here."

I sat back, inwardly reeling. This had to mean several hundred thousand pounds in value at the least. In my world that was a life-changing windfall. It was certainly enough to have a significant impact on my day-to-day existence. It would mean for instance that Ashley and I could set our sights much higher when it came to looking for somewhere in Cornwall to live together. Or I could give myself more breathing space in deciding what to do with my life.

I'd already handed over various bits of documentation to confirm that I was the right Michael Stanhope. But who was Elizabeth Sanderson? I said, "Is it usual for people to leave their worldly goods to someone who has never heard of them?"

"It's not unknown, but I wouldn't say it's common."

"And you have no idea why she picked me out of the air?"

"I think you can safely assume she didn't pick you out of the air, but no, we don't know what did prompt her to name you. I daresay some detailed research would provide an explanation, but that goes beyond our remit."

I sensed a qualification, and looked at him questioningly. "You said there had been a development?"

"Yes. I'm afraid I have to tell you that the will is being contested."

Despite the fact that I'd never expected this bounty, I immediately felt indignant. "Contested? Who by?"

"His name is Philip Crabtree. He's Elizabeth Sanderson's nephew."

A relative. It was hardly surprising. Why should a total stranger inherit this woman's estate instead of fairly close relative? However, I heard myself saying, "Does he have any grounds?"

"That remains to be seen. All we know so far is that he has submitted a caveat. It's a technical term. It will delay the granting of probate, and if the findings go his way, it could eventually change the way the estate is disposed of."

I looked carefully at him, sensing that perhaps he knew more than he was telling me. "Does he have to state the basis on which he's objecting?"

He smiled briefly. "I gather he is alleging that Miss Sanderson was not of sound mind when she changed her will, and was subjected to undue pressure." He sniffed. "Actually that's two different objections. Mr Crabtree is evidently trying to cover all bases."

"So you're telling me she changed her will?"

"Oh yes. Just in the last few months. Up to that point the Crabtrees would have been the sole beneficiaries."

"I see. And do we know why she did that?"

"That's something nobody knows. Her final will is perfectly legitimate in itself, but unfortunately for you, the law allows this legal challenge."

I sat for a moment, thinking. "What did Elizabeth Sanderson die of?"

"It was from an overdose of medications for her condition. Cancer. It was ruled misadventure."

"But if she was subjected to undue pressure, who is supposed to have been exerting it? I didn't even know her, so it could hardly have been me."

"I can't answer that. It's one of the aspects that has to be considered."

"So what happens next? What should I do?"

"Well, if Mr Crabtree insists on pursuing his claim, a court will eventually consider its validity, and will then make a determination."

I said, "Do you think I should approach these Crabtree people myself? Perhaps we could come to some sort of accommodation. I don't want to disinherit them if this is something they've been expecting all their lives."

"Well, there's nothing to stop you reaching a settlement out of court. It's often the best way to resolve disputes like this." He gave me a curt smile. "It's not really my place to advise you. If you want advice, you should consider appointing a solicitor of your own. However, off the record I would say don't be in a rush to dilute your claim on the estate. After all, a will expresses the last intentions of the deceased. Who are we to dispute it?"

"Tell that to Mr Crabtree."

He smiled. "But you understand what I'm saying."

"Do the Crabtrees live in Harrogate?"

"Philip and Angela," he said. "No, they live here in Newcastle."

I would have liked to ask for their address, but felt it would be inappropriate somehow to provide any further indication of my intentions. Besides, I felt he'd already offered me a coded clue by naming Philip Crabtree's wife. If I went looking for them, that should allow me to find them easily enough.

I did however ask him for Elizabeth Sanderson's address in Harrogate, which he readily gave me. I could Streetview the house later. As I left he told me, "Keep in touch, and we'll advise you of any further developments."

* * *

On advice from David Smythe I caught a bus from outside his office to nearby Jesmond, which I'd discovered was a fashionable inner suburb of Newcastle. Imposing Victorian terraces offered a mix of hotels, flats, upmarket houses, bedsits and small businesses. Mellings' public relations firm, Ashby Collins, had its offices in a tree-lined street just off Osborne Road, the spine road through the area.

Hugh Collins, co-founder and head of the firm, was more affable in person than he'd sounded in our conversations on the phone over recent weeks, and seemed resigned to the possibility of losing his work for Mellings. "We've had five years with them. It's been a good run."

"Latimers won't be in a hurry to change things," I assured him. "St Austell is at the other end of the country. We can't expect to have a finger on the pulse of what's happening up here in the North East all the time. We're going to need people on the ground, and you have a good track record."

He nodded his acknowledgement. “I know you, don’t I, Mike? Didn’t you used to be a journalist? I think you’re on our mailing list.”

I cringed inwardly. Yes, I used to be a journalist, though I’d always had a love-hate relationship with the job. Yet it saddened me to think it might soon be in the past tense. “Jack of all trades, that’s me.”

“Well, at least you’ll know what the press is after. It’s more than can be said for a lot of our clients.”

Chapter 6

Working in the same room as Jamie and Andrea wasn't as difficult as I'd feared. For much of the time at least one of them was out and about, liaising with people in various departments at Mellings. When we were all in the office together they mostly kept their heads down, apart from exchanging occasional knowing glances.

My main problem was that I didn't really know what I was supposed to be doing there myself. Unlike them, I didn't have a clearly defined function. When I got the chance I chatted to Chris Melling and his fellow-directors, and was able to report our conversations to Bob Latimer, who had already phoned me twice at my hotel. But what I told him seemed anecdotal and unstructured.

Ashley told me I should take advantage of being in the area and go off sightseeing around the North East. "Bob never said you had to be in the office all the time," she pointed out. "You're a free agent. Enjoy it." She laughed. "In fact, if you really do inherit that house, you'll soon be able to retire and swan around as much as you like. Maybe you should get in some practice."

She'd expressed amazement when I told her the extent of Elizabeth Sanderson's bequest, and cautioned me not to take anything for granted. Not that she needed to; the whole thing still seemed to have an air of unreality about it, especially since the will was being contested.

At any rate, for the time being I felt I should show at least some semblance of having a working role. I called Jason Bright, my contact in London at one of the weekly logistics publications. "Do you need an article about the logistics market in Tyne and Wear? Maybe an interview with a major player?"

"We just did a regional roundup of the area last month," he said. "Can't really revisit the subject for a while."

"That's a shame."

"If you pick up any news leads while you're up there, by all means bang over the odd story. We're always on the lookout for those."

"I'll keep my eye out."

So the week started to unfold, and I battled on with my article about forklift trucks.

* * *

On Wednesday morning Andrea looked up abruptly. "That's very odd."

Jamie and I stared across at her. She was poring over a sheaf of paperwork on her desk, glancing up and down at her screen at the same time.

"CJ Melling Holdings Northern," she said. "That's Chris Melling's private holding company, isn't it?"

We waited.

"They just recently transferred most of their assets to Melling Logistics."

Jamie said, "Chris owns both companies, so he's perfectly entitled to do that, isn't he?"

"But it's a bit odd, don't you think?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. It's just that the company isn't mentioned in the schedule of acquired assets in the Latimer takeover."

"Maybe it all happened too recently. They'll show up eventually."

"I suppose."

I asked, "What assets are we talking about exactly?"

She glanced down for a moment. "Mostly it's small shareholdings in some of the companies that Melling Logistics works for. Chris must have spotted potential in them. But there's a majority shareholding in one of them, Ashurst Concepts."

I'd recently heard that name. It was the company Chris Melling's daughter had told me she worked for – the one selling consumer electrical goods. I said, "So after the takeover, Latimer Logistics will have a majority holding in Ashurst Concepts?"

"Correct. The point is, Ashursts hasn't been audited from the point of view of the acquisition, so far as I know."

I said, "But presumably this will all come up in the due diligence process. It's just a matter of time, isn't it?"

"That's what you'd expect."

"Ashurst made a mint after championing the spiralizer, didn't it?" I was pleased with myself for being able to demonstrate this apparent insight.

She nodded. "They won awards for being one of the fastest-growing companies in their field." She grimaced. "It just seemed like a passing fad to me."

"So now Latimers will get the kudos."

"Maybe." She flicked her pen with her hand. "But if so, I wonder why Chris Melling decided to dump his holding?"

* * *

I decided to raise the Ashurst issue directly with Chris Melling, and caught him at lunchtime in the company's small canteen, buying a sandwich from one of the vending machines in the corner.

"My daughter Jenna persuaded me to buy into Ashurst," he told me, taking a seat and peeling open his sandwich wrapper. "She was right. Astronomic growth for a start-up company in the first couple of years."

"Why are you selling your stake, then?"

He shrugged. "I'm scaling back all my investments. That's just one. I thought Latimers might as well get the benefits. Bob knows all about it. In any case, I get a stake in the enlarged Latimer group as part of the deal. Presumably you knew that."

Did I know that? I didn't think Bob had mentioned it. However, I nodded, adding, "I've heard that Ashursts' growth rate is levelling out."

"Inevitable, after such a good start. But they've got critical mass now." He looked at me for a moment, assessing, then seemed to come to a decision. "I suppose you reported the hijacking, did you?"

"Hijacking?"

"Ah, you didn't then." He looked a little regretful over having brought it up, but was now committed. "It was a few weeks ago. A container-load of product was hijacked on the way from Southampton docks to Ashursts' headquarters in Leeds."

"What happened?"

"Someone drove the artic out of a lorry park, and it disappeared off the face of the earth. You wouldn't think it was possible in this day and age, but they obviously knew how to avoid surveillance cameras."

"Was it ever recovered?"

"The truck was found next day in Bradford, but the load was gone forever."

"But surely if someone starts selling the stuff to consumers, it can be tracked by product codes and all that?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But obviously that didn't deter the thieves. I suppose they'll feed it into the market bit by bit. Or maybe they've re-exported it."

"Presumably it was covered by insurance."

"Oh yes. The claim is going through as we speak."

He rose to head off to his office, then turned back to me. "I wonder if you'd care to join me and my wife for dinner tomorrow night? With your two colleagues, I mean. Sheila loves entertaining, and you'll make a good target for her latest ideas on Mediterranean cuisine."

“That would be great, thank you.”

“If you don’t know the North East very well, I’ve got something that I think will fascinate you. A little film show.” He pronounced it “fillum” – another exaggerated Geordie-ism.

“A film show?”

He grinned. “No, it’s not soft porn, if that’s what you’re thinking, and it’s not what we did on our holidays. Much more interesting. It’s always popular with our guests.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

* * *

I thought about the coming weekend. Should I make the marathon trek back to Cornwall? I wanted to see Ashley, but it seemed a very long way to go for such a short visit. I was conscious that thousands of people flew regularly between Scotland and London, which involved a journey nearly as long as this, but getting to Cornwall from Newcastle and back seemed a challenge of a different order of magnitude.

Ashley settled the matter when I phoned her that night. “Stephanie’s coming down for the weekend from Bishop’s Stortford, so maybe you’d prefer to leave it?”

Stephanie was a friend of hers from college in Bristol. I’d met her on a previous visit, and we’d soon realised we had virtually nothing in common. If I went back while she was there, I would be forcing Ashley to divide herself between us, which seemed unfair and unsatisfactory.

“Let’s save it for the next weekend,” I suggested. “Either I could come down to you, or maybe you could come up here.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Chapter 7

Chris and Sheila Melling lived on a mature estate of well-to-do houses on the edge of a village a few miles north of Newcastle. I drove Jamie and Andrea there in our hire car, and we soon found ourselves drinking cocktails on Chris's ample lawn. The sprawling redbrick house was built in arts and crafts style with steeply pitched roofs and tall gables, though Chris told us it only dated back to the 1950s, forty or more years after that fashion had come and gone.

"Back then Newcastle wasn't the trendy place it is now. Industry was on the wane. Some areas were still pretty deprived. Your typical senior executive wanted a bucolic bolt hole where the world seemed a prettier place. This estate fitted the bill nicely."

"It can't have been that bad in the city."

"Well, I didn't think so. I grew up in Fenham, and I loved Newcastle." He pronounced it "New-cassle", in contrast to my southern inclination to put the accent on the "New". "Still, this place suits us very well."

I said, "Fenham?"

"It's a suburb on the west side."

We moved into the dining room, and Sheila unveiled her latest culinary experiment – an elaborate paella containing a variety of different seafood types. It seemed to go down well, and I could see she was pleased.

At one point she turned to Andrea. "So how long have you two been a couple?"

"About a year," Andrea said, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"And is marriage on the horizon?"

Andrea and Jamie seemed unperturbed at the question itself. However, she cast him a sullen look, saying nothing. He cleared his throat. "I'm waiting for my divorce to come through."

I glanced at him in surprise. I'd never given any thought to their personal circumstances, but perhaps it explained a lot.

Sheila was unfazed. "What about you, Mike? Bob Latimer says your other half is a lynchpin at the company."

I found myself smiling. "Ashley, yes. You'll have to meet her. You'll really like her." Why did I have to say that? Was I trying to contrast her with Andrea?

Sheila smiled indulgently. "I'm sure we will."

* * *

After the meal Chris led us through to a lounge that was set up as a viewing room. Two rows of comfortable upright chairs had been arranged to face a large white screen. Behind them, a projector sat on a tall table, with metal film reels attached on one side.

"Bell & Howell sixteen millimetre sound projector," Chris said reverentially. "They're not made any more."

I said, "Is it very rare?"

He smiled wryly. "Not really." He ushered us into the seats and dimmed the lights. "You have my great-uncle Frank to thank for this," he said, fiddling with the projector. "Frank Giardini, cinematographer supremo. He grew up in Gateshead."

A series of white count-down numbers flashed on the screen in descending sequence, and then we were launched into a travelogue film about Newcastle and its environs, apparently made in the 1950s. The colours were brash, the commentary was anodyne, the music was irritatingly jaunty. Nevertheless, the insight into a vanished world was fascinating. We saw ships passing under the arching Tyne Bridge, horse racing at Gosforth Park, children playing in Jesmond Dene, a royal visit to the city.

It lasted about ten minutes. When it finished, Chris turned up the lights and explained, “Frank was the lead cameraman on that film. I inherited his film archive. It’s become a bit of a hobby with me.”

I said, “He didn’t work just in Newcastle, presumably?”

“Oh, no, his camera work was used in all sorts of films – whatever the film companies wanted. Then he went independent – set up a little company of his own. They worked on contract to the bigger filmmakers – people like Pathé, British Transport Films, that kind of thing.”

He showed us a couple more short films, then we broke for coffee. I asked, “Do you have any more films about Newcastle?”

“Not complete films with sound, no, but there are plenty of fragments – speculative stuff that he took, positioning shots for slotting into big studio films, that kind of thing.”

“Could we see some more?”

Andrea shot me a reproachful glance. Evidently she’d had enough. I ignored it. Anyway, Chris didn’t need asking twice. “I’ve spliced some of it together. I thought I might add a soundtrack one of these days.”

He changed reels and dimmed the lights again, and immediately we were travelling along one of Newcastle’s main shopping streets on a sunny summer’s day. Again, the film was in full colour. “This dates from the late nineteen forties,” Chris said.

We watched as shoppers hurried silently out of our way and policemen on point duty waved us stiffly through junctions. The quality seemed extraordinarily good for its day: perhaps not on a par with high-definition television, but sharp and clear all the same. I’d seen similar material online, but it had always looked blurred and vague. On Chris’s film you could make out small text on shop fronts, number plates of cars and buses, even the faces of pedestrians. It was a remarkable pictorial record.

As if hearing my thoughts, Chris commented, “There’s a lot of stuff like this on the internet. People were just beginning to wake up to the opportunities that cine film offered. But of course it was an expensive hobby for amateurs, so most footage was shot on eight millimetre. It wasn’t always very sharp in the first place, and footage that’s been digitised for the web has often been done badly. Frank’s sixteen millimetre film is much cleaner, and some of it was originally shot on thirty-five millimetre, which is better still. It looks good even when it’s converted down.”

“Have you put any of his archives online?”

“Not so far. The copyright ownership is a bit of a grey area, to be honest.”

The scenes in Chris’s composite reel jumped between different occasions and different parts of the city, and this time there was no connecting logic. Nevertheless, I was entranced. The fashions reflected a bygone age – men with trilbys or flat caps, women with elaborate hats and smart dresses. There was little indication of post-war austerity in their turnout, which seemed altogether more considered and formal than would be the case today. That said, many of the cars and vans looked old and rather shabby.

At the end of the short reel Chris turned up the lights again and the others retreated to another room. I asked if he would show the last reel again.

It was on the second run-through that I spotted something. As we progressed along one of the city’s main streets, the straight-ahead view had been intercut with shots of bystanders, and a young couple caught my attention. Again I was impressed with the sharpness of the images; you could make out the couple’s features with striking clarity. They were standing arm in arm, smiling at the camera as it passed. The woman wore a floral dress and had shortish curly hair. The rather gaunt-faced man was wearing a dark jacket and trousers. The woman seemed strangely familiar.

“Can you go back over the last ten seconds?”

Chris fiddled with the projector, then re-started it. I peered more closely. It felt almost as if I’d known in advance that this woman would be there. “I said, “Can you freeze-frame on that couple?”

“Not really,” Chris said. “This isn’t a video, it’s film. I always worry that if I stop it I might blow the frame.” He turned to me, apparently feeling the need to elaborate. “I don’t want to run the risk that the heat from the projector bulb would damage the film.”

“Oh.” I pondered this. “But it must be possible to extract a still image somehow?”

“Of course. Best if I give it to my technical man in town.”

“Maybe I could take a couple of photographs off the screen?”

“Be my guest.” Obliging he ran the scene a third time, and I fired off a couple of shots with my phone. I wasn’t sure how well they worked, but at a glance they looked reasonable on the phone’s small screen.

He stopped the film and turned up the lights. “I’d be more than happy to get a some stills made if you like. You want an image showing that young couple?”

I nodded. “If you wouldn’t mind. I’ll pay you for it. Don’t ask me how, but I feel as if I know those people. The woman, anyway. I’d love to follow it up.”

“Do you have roots in Newcastle then?”

“No, not at all. But maybe they were visiting or something.”

“But you don’t actually know them?”

“I don’t think so, but maybe I can work out who they are.”

He smiled a little sceptically. “Good luck with that.”

Chapter 8

On Saturday I caught the train into Newcastle. Several of the people at Mellings had expressed amusement at the way I favoured trains and buses over driving. It was hard to convey how this was an ingrained way of life in London, so I'd given up trying. There was a station just across the river from the village where I was staying, and I was looking forward to the journey along the Tyne valley.

I wasn't disappointed. There were sweeping views across the sides of the valley, increasingly populated and industrialised as we approached the city centre, and the high-level Tyne crossing was dramatic. A multi-layered skyline of civic and commercial buildings lowered in front of us and stretched away to both sides.

This was my first full exposure to Newcastle city centre, which I'd largely ignored on my brief visit on Monday. It was more extensive than I expected. I marvelled at the Georgian sandstone terraces around Grey Street and Grainger Street, and eventually decided I'd found the street where I'd spotted the young couple in Chris Melling's film. It was Northumberland Street, a kind of mini-Oxford Street at the heart of the shopping area. No doubt a lot of the buildings had been replaced since that film was made, but the atmosphere seemed the same.

At Chris Melling's insistence I wandered along until I found the Tyneside Cinema, which he'd told me was the country's oldest active newsreel theatre. Two of its latter-day patrons, he said, were responsible for probably the most famous feature films set in Newcastle – *Get Carter* and *Stormy Monday*.

"They're both gangster movies," he'd pointed out. "Beautiful films, but they probably didn't do much to improve the image of the North East. It's not really like that around here."

"I'll take your word for it."

I had a snack lunch in the cinema's trendy café, then went in search of the castle that gave the city its name. However, it turned out to be a little underwhelming; all that seemed to be left was the monumental rectangular keep, which admittedly had been impressively restored. The cathedral, too, seemed somewhat apologetic, but its outsized main tower was undeniably striking.

I found myself near the High Level Bridge, which carried both a road and a railway over the Tyne. At this point the terrain on both sides of the river rose sharply, so Newcastle and Gateshead faced each other from elevated positions across the river valley. The High Level Bridge and the Tyne Bridge crossed the river at this upper level, while down below lay the Victorian Swing Bridge and further downstream, the more recent Millennium Bridge.

I decided to go down to the Quayside area, and made my way there via a series of ancient stone steps and passageways. I whiled away part of the afternoon outside a riverside pub, marvelling at the dramatic backdrop of high and low bridges against the sharply rising cityscape on both sides of the river. Sitting in the sun reading a guide book, I looked up periodically across the river at Gateshead's Baltic arts centre – formerly a flour mill.

* * *

"Mike Stanhope, by all that's holy."

I looked up in surprise. It was Jenna Melling, wearing dark blue jeans and a crimson jacket and carrying a couple of colourful paper shopping bags adorned with fashion brands. With her was Greg Atkins. I hadn't thought of them as a couple.

I shuffled round in my chair. "I'm just taking in some of the sights."

She grinned. "My dad told me he'd sent you to pick up some culture, but I didn't think I'd actually find you."

I indicated the spare chairs round my table. "Join me?"

I was hoping Greg wouldn't give me a repeat performance of the hostile welcome he'd offered when Chris Melling introduced us. In fact he seemed affable but reserved. He said, "I did the sightseeing thing when I moved here a couple of years ago. It's an impressive place."

I glanced up at the two giant bridges – the High Level to our right and the arching Tyne Bridge to our left. "I can't disagree."

At her insistence Jenna went to the bar to buy us all afternoon tea. When we were settled at the table again she turned to me. "So, Mike, what are you getting up to at the office? Are you busy raking through our murky past?"

"Sorry?"

"Well, you're part of the due diligence team, am I right? Making sure that Mellings is a good buy for Bob Latimer and his crew."

"Ah. No, not at all. That kind of stuff is done by lawyers and accountants – people who actually know what they're looking for."

"And you don't."

"Not in that way, no."

She nodded to herself as if satisfied on a point. After a moment she said, "So what *are* you doing up here in the North East?"

I looked into her eyes. "Getting in a bit of free sightseeing, courtesy of my generous boss."

Greg said, "I thought so," smiling to show he was entering into the spirit of this.

Jenna sat back, squinting at me against the afternoon sun. "It's a nice little business, Mellings. Bob Latimer has done all right for himself."

Greg raised his eyebrows. "Not so little these days – especially if we clinch the Franchi contract." He pronounced the name to rhyme with "lanky".

Jenna immediately frowned at him. "I don't think that's general knowledge yet, Greg."

He gave her an embarrassed look and said, "Right. Sorry."

She turned to me. "You didn't hear that, did you Mike?"

"Hear what?"

* * *

Although Jenna's rebuke had seemed mild, Greg fell into near silence. Nevertheless, Jenna kept the conversation going in her animated and slightly ironic style, and even persuaded Greg to fetch us some more tea.

Finally she turned to me. "Have you checked out the Newcastle night life yet, Mike? I think we should give you a taster."

Greg said, "Mike probably wants to get back, don't you Mike?"

I shrugged, unsure whose lead to follow. "I should probably head off."

"Why no! At least let's get ourselves up to Bigg Market and see what's happening."

Greg sat back, immediately defeated, so in due course off we went on the steep climb up to the city centre.

Bigg Market, a short but wide street, was the hub of Newcastle's night life, providing a home to numerous pubs and bars. Even though this was only early evening and it was still broad daylight, hefty-looking bouncers in semi-formal attire loitered outside some of the entrances like reluctant ushers at a wedding. A few young people dressed up for the occasion had already clustered in small groups in the pedestrianised area.

"This street was named after Mr Bigg, a famous gangster," Jenna said.

I said, "No it wasn't."

She laughed. She picked a bar apparently at random, exchanging a word of banter with the bouncer as we entered. The volume of music inside had already been ratcheted up, but was still just about low enough for normal conversation. I volunteered to head for the bar.

As I stood waiting to be served I glanced at Jenna and Greg, who were silhouetted in front of the window. They seemed to be engaged in an angry exchange of words. By the time I returned with three glasses of white wine, Greg had disappeared.

“I never thought he’d just sod off,” she grumbled. “Not very gentlemanly.”

I looked at her questioningly. She simply said, “Don’t ask.”

I held up the three glasses. “One too many, I think.”

She grabbed one of them. “All the more for me.” She drank down half of it defiantly.

Jenna was a toucher. I was aware of a strange implied intimacy as she put her hand on my arm, pulling me towards the window. A small bench seat had miraculously come available, and we quickly sat down. There was barely enough room for two, and our thighs pressed together.

“I suppose I take advantage of Greg,” she said with a sigh. “I know I shouldn’t.”

“How long have you been together?”

“Oh, we’re not really together. I’ve only just broken up with my ex.”

“Do I know him?”

“I doubt it. He’s Piers Ashurst, the founder of Ashurst Concepts. We were at college together.”

* * *

Jenna drank the whole of the first glass of wine in short order and made rapid inroads into the second. We chatted about nothing much for a while, and I became increasingly aware of the pressure of Jenna’s body against mine. I couldn’t escape it without ungallantly standing up to separate myself from her, but it was hard to know how not to enjoy it. Finally she said, “I’d better get going. I’m supposed to be meeting some friends later on.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Course I will, man.” She was back in defiant mood. “I’ll grab a taxi to my flat.” We both stood up, suddenly finding ourselves very close together. Smiling, she said, “I think I could get to like you, Mike Stanhope.”

I smiled blandly as Ashley’s words rang in my ears: Jenna was a temptress. The trouble was, she *was* tempting. Maybe it was a result of the wine I’d drunk too quickly, but when she leaned forward abruptly to kiss me, I didn’t pull away.

What was the matter with me? I hadn’t sought out this connection. It felt like an instant betrayal of my settled relationship with Ashley, and I wanted to deny it even as it was happening. Yet for some reason, for a moment at least, I allowed myself to be carried along by it.

It was fleeting and inconsequential, but that was all it took. As I straightened, over her shoulder I saw Jamie and Andrea, who had just walked in from the street. And they saw me.

Chapter 9

Elizabeth Sanderson's house in Harrogate looked impressive. I stared at it on my laptop screen the following morning, sitting in my hotel's modest lounge bar. It was a double-fronted detached property in a street of upmarket Victorian terraced houses. My estimation of its value crept up.

I opened a couple of property websites to get a feel for house prices in Elizabeth's area. They weren't as high as I expected by London standards, but it was clear that I was looking at a value of at least half a million pounds. That was before inheritance tax, of course. Still, it looked like being a truly remarkable windfall – assuming it came my way after the legal challenge to the will.

I then tried searching for Elizabeth Sanderson herself. This took more time, but eventually I learned that she had been an English teacher at a college in Harrogate, and had retired a few years before. The house seemed big for an unmarried woman living on her own, but that was something I couldn't explain.

The next task on my list was to search for Philip Crabtree, the man who was challenging the will. He proved easier to find. He was a businessman working at a company in the Newcastle area, and he lived with his wife Angela in Hexham, a small town fifteen miles to the west.

I was tempted to make contact with him. Although the solicitor had advised caution, I couldn't see any real problem. Meeting him surely wouldn't make matters any worse, would it? If anything, we might come to some compromise over the will.

More to the point, I felt that if I spoke to him I might discover some clue about why Elizabeth had included me in her will at all.

Then I remembered the woman I'd spotted in Chris Melling's film. Could there be some clue here? It seemed pretty tenuous, yet I really had felt a distant connection to her. Could it mean that I had some hitherto unknown roots in the North East?

I picked up my phone and looked at the two pictures I'd taken by pointing the lens at Chris's screen. I couldn't really make out the woman's features, so I copied the images to my laptop and looked at them on that.

I still couldn't see her features very clearly. Both images were dim and quite blurred, either through camera shake or because they were photographed from a screen. The faces were much less defined than I remembered from Chris's film.

I zoomed in on the woman anyway and studied her. She seemed to have a warm expression, and was smiling curiously at the camera. Presumably the cameraman had been in plain view, perhaps travelling in an open vehicle and wielding his camera conspicuously. She was definitely familiar, but I couldn't place her. Also, of course, I was aware that she had a classic look. I could be recognising a *type* of face, not an individual.

Unconvinced, I closed the images. Perhaps when I saw the blow-up Chris had promised me, all would become clearer.

Finally I allowed my mind to play over my encounter with Andrea and Jamie last night. Had they seen me kissing Jenna – or rather, Jenna kissing me? That was the central question, and I suspected the answer was yes. But did it matter? Well, there was no reason to think they would do anything about it, other than perhaps feel badly towards me over my disloyalty to Ashley. No, the concern in my mind was that their awareness made the incident into something real. They had prevented me from dismissing it as if it had never happened.

I sat back in my easy chair, staring moodily out into the leafy hotel garden. Did I want to have a relationship with Jenna Melling? Of course not. In that case, had the kiss meant anything? Not in my mind, and almost certainly not in hers either. So did it even matter? Well, apparently it mattered to me. The fact was that in a corner of my mind, for a brief moment anyway, I'd enjoyed it. What I felt now was chiefly a sense of surprise and self-dislike, but this wasn't enough to prevent a cloud of guilt from blowing up in my mind, and I didn't know how to dispel it.

* * *

I glanced at my watch. Eleven o'clock on a Sunday morning. What was Ashley doing now? Suddenly I felt an urgent need to speak to her. I picked up my phone.

She answered promptly. "Mr Stanhope!"

Immediately I was smiling. "What's happening?"

"Stephanie and I are having coffee, and in a minute we're going off to St Ives."

"That's nice."

"There'll be a lot of tourists, but she says she doesn't care."

I told her briefly about the woman in Chris's film, and the fact that I felt I recognised her. She said, "Don't tell me you're off on another of your obsessions. Look what happened last time."

She was talking about a series of events the previous year, when I'd embarked on a mission to track down a girl I'd met in my childhood. It was through that search that I'd met Ashley in the first place, and it had also revealed that the girl I was searching for was Ashley's half-sister.

"Be careful what you wish for – is that what you're saying?"

She laughed. "Well, it ended up all right for us, but you never know, do you? And I know what you're like when you get a bee in your bonnet about something. You just won't let go."

I took a deep breath. "So are you up for a visit to the north next weekend? I know it's a hell of a trek, but it could be fun."

"I might be. What's the plan?"

In fact I had no specific plan in mind, but as she spoke an idea came to me. "What if you came north as far as Leeds and we stayed somewhere in that area? It would cut an hour or two off your journey, and we could go over to Harrogate to scope out my new house. It's quite near there."

"Your new house? Getting a bit ahead of ourselves, aren't we? Or are you planning to migrate to Yorkshire?"

"Ha. No, I just thought it would be interesting. I looked up the house online, and it definitely could be worth quite a lot."

"I see." She paused. "I'd have to square it with Bob Latimer to take a day or two off, but I bet he'll say yes."

I disconnected with a sense of relief. The prospect of seeing Ashley should put all thoughts of Jenna out of my mind. It wasn't that I was seriously tempted to get involved with her. In the four or five years between my marriage break-up and meeting Ashley I'd survived with little enough female company. Casual relationships didn't seem to be in my DNA. Yet for some reason Jenna's teasing advances were proving unnerving. Hopefully Ashley's visit would help me put a stop to them.

Chapter 10

Philip and Angela Crabtree's landline number was listed in the local phone book. I tapped it into my phone, then sat staring at it. Was I really going to contact these people? Would it help the cause of my inheritance or merely muddy the waters?

I glanced out into the hotel garden. Although this was midsummer, today was dull and overcast. The prospect of a blank Sunday afternoon held little appeal. Almost for want of a better idea I pressed the green button.

"Angela Crabtree." It was a pleasant, mellifluous voice. I felt encouraged.

"Ah, hi. This is Mike Stanhope here. We don't know each other, but I'm mentioned in Elizabeth Sanderson's will. I believe we have a mutual interest in it."

"Oh, hello Mike. What can I do for you?" Her tone was immediately reserved, but still pleasant enough.

"Well, it so happens that I'm visiting the North East, and I was wondering if it would help for us all to meet."

"I see. Well, yes, I suppose that might be useful. What did you have in mind? My husband is out at the moment, but he should be back some time this afternoon."

I hadn't held out much hope that they would be willing to see me today, but since she appeared to be suggesting it, I was ready to jump on the idea. "What if I came over at about three o'clock?"

* * *

Hexham, where the Crabtrees lived, was less than half an hour's drive from my village: a pretty country town on the south bank of the Tyne, with a period market square.

The Crabtrees lived on slightly higher ground on the outskirts. Between the large modern houses I glimpsed views across rolling tracts of Northumbrian countryside. I parked and walked down a short but steep driveway to the front door.

Angela Crabtree looked to be in her late thirties. She was dressed in jeans and a sweater and had dark hair tied in a bunch.

"I'm afraid Philip isn't back yet, but come in anyway."

She led me into a lounge with an impressive view across open countryside. Two young children were playing a game on the floor, and paid me little attention. Angela disappeared to make coffee, and I looked out through the floor-to-ceiling window at the garden and the landscape beyond it. The sun kept breaking through the clouds, illuminating parts of the patchwork of fields in brighter, differentiated colours – yellows, russets, greens, browns.

"What a wonderful place to live," I said as Angela returned.

"It is, isn't it?" Her speech had that light, engaging Geordie musicality. She indicated that I should sit down and she took a seat facing me. "We haven't been here long. We used to have a much smaller place in Newcastle." She gazed at the view for a moment, then turned to me. "So tell me, Mike, what exactly was your connection with Elizabeth?"

"Ha! I have absolutely no idea. Until I was contacted about her will, I'd never even heard of her."

She looked puzzled. "You didn't know her? I must have got the wrong end of the stick then."

For the first time it struck me that I could be talking myself into a hole here. If the will was going to be discussed in a court, perhaps anything I said could be given in evidence – and here I was, already casting doubt on my connection with Elizabeth Sanderson. Maybe visiting these people hadn't been such a clever idea after all. But it was too late now to back out.

I said, "No, the news about the will came completely out of the blue."

"That's very peculiar, isn't it?"

I smiled in complicit bafflement. "What was she like, if you don't mind me asking?"

"She was a nice lady. Very wise. Very self-contained. She just got on with her life."

“Were you close to her? I mean, did she figure much in your daily lives? I don’t really have any feel for your family history.”

She shrugged. “We exchanged Christmas cards, that sort of thing. We didn’t actually see her much from one year to the next. But then she fell ill, and Philip started visiting her regularly in Harrogate. He was really supportive when things got harder for her. He put himself out for her.”

Uncharitably, I immediately wondered if his visits had been prompted by altruism or by an urge to remind Elizabeth of her family ties. I admonished myself inwardly. For all I knew, Philip Crabtree might be the kindest man in Hexham.

If so, he showed little sign of it when he arrived a few minutes later. He thrust the lounge door open dramatically, a powerful presence that seemed to make the large room shrink.

Angela said, “Phil, this is Mike Stanhope.”

He stared at me with a hard expression in his eyes: a striking man with a square jaw and head of fine dark hair. For a Sunday afternoon he seemed overdressed in suit trousers and a shirt and tie.

“Who invited you here?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw the two children stop what they were doing and stare over at us.

Angela quickly said, “I did, Phil. Mike thought it would be helpful if we all met up. Did I do wrong?” I thought I detected an undertone of fear in her voice.

“We shouldn’t be in contact while this matter is *sub judice*,” he said firmly.

Whilst this sounded plausible, it seemed to contradict what the solicitor had told me. He’d suggested we might be able to settle the matter by discussion. I said, “I don’t think there’s any rule against interested parties conferring if they choose to.”

“Is that so? Well we don’t choose to. Frankly you’ve got a cheek coming here while I’m out.”

Angela gave him a reproachful look. “Phil, I told him you’d be back by three o’clock. That’s what you said. Anyway, he’s not doing any harm.”

“He certainly isn’t, because he’s leaving now. Isn’t that right, Mr Stanhope?”

I stood up, my pulse racing, and said, “I’m sorry you feel it necessary to be so hostile. I just thought we might be able to clear the air.”

He took a small but menacing step towards me. “Well this isn’t the way to do it.”

I raised my hands in submission. “Point taken. My apologies if I’ve upset you.”

He ushered me into the hall and towards the front door. “Goodbye, Mr Stanhope. Don’t call again.”

See full book for chapters 11-81!

Amazon UK:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B01N0PRFV0>

Amazon US:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01N0PRFV0>

Other books by Peter Rowlands

Alternative Outcome (Mike Stanhope Book 1)

Mike Stanhope, divorced and disillusioned with his job in journalism, hopes to switch his life to a new tack by self-publishing a mystery novel based on a true story. But someone is after him, and the pressure is mounting.

Could his pursuer be the subject of an investigative article Mike once wrote? Could there be a link to Mike's attempts to track down a girl he knew as a child – the memory of whom he hijacked for his novel? Or might there be some deeper connection to his book?

As Mike struggles to keep his life on an even keel and tries to grasp at the chance of a new relationship, fact and fiction start to intertwine.

www.amazon.co.uk/dummylink

Escape Sequence

Stand-alone mystery novel

Who is he? He can't remember. All he knows is that he's driving north, perhaps fleeing something. He starts to piece his past together, yet feels like an observer in his own life. Struggling to take control of his complex relationships and responsibilities, he fends off increasingly aggressive threats as he tries to find out what happened to him.

In preparation

If you'd like me to add you to my mailing list, just click this link: www.peterrowlands.com/list. I won't use your email address for any other purpose, or pass it on to anyone else.

Keep up to date at:

www.peterrowlands.com

About the author

Peter Rowlands was born in Newcastle upon Tyne, but has lived almost all his adult life in London. He edited and contributed to transport and logistics magazines for many years. *Deficit of Diligence* is his second published novel, and the sequel to *Alternative Outcome*, which is also available on Amazon.