

# **Libya Story**

J. J. Ward

To My Wife

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*The moral right of the author has been asserted.*

*Cover picture taken by the author on 9 April 2016 shows Nelson's Column.*

## **Note on Language**

This novel was produced in the UK and uses British-English language conventions ('authorise' instead of 'authorize', 'the government are' instead of 'the government is', etc.)

# Contents

Chapter 1: A Mini Trilogy
Chapter 2: Whoops, There Goes Gravity
Chapter 3: Another Gloomy Fenella Sunset
Chapter 4: Two Sisters in Search of a Younger Brother
Chapter 5: A Plan For All Seasons
Chapter 6: The No. 2 Ladies Detective Agency
Chapter 7: In To Africa
Chapter 8: Après La Double Whammy
Chapter 9: The Petroleum Facilities Guards
Chapter 10: A Hard Night's Night
Chapter 11: Encounter with Bollywood
Chapter 12: Horvath's Golden Hello
Chapter 13: Day Tripper
Chapter 14: A Baddie Comes to Town
Chapter 15: Mordred Misses Out on The American National Dish
Chapter 16: Not Quite Seattle Grace
Chapter 17: Dead Dog Time
Chapter 18: Alec Cunningham Again
Chapter 19: A Decent Burial
Chapter 20: Mladenov's Golden Hello
Chapter 21: The Peanuts Episode
Chapter 22: Basement Pow Wow
Chapter 23: Phone Call x 2, Local Rate
Chapter 24: Into the Hornets' Nest
Chapter 25: Job Application Ref. 835
Chapter 26: The Traditional Epiloguey Thing
Acknowledgements

## Chapter 1: A Mini Trilogy

### *Episode 1: Present day. Islington, London*

John Mordred had been having the same dream for over a month now. It always began in the *Station Hauptbahnhof* in Berlin with him displaying Mabel's picture to passers-by. "Have you seen this lady?" he asked. (The quaint way he used 'lady', as if it was the nineteenth century.) "Have you seen the lady in this photo?" The few people he managed to speak to – the majority were always unreachable – seemed to fly by in the opposite direction. *No. No. No.* Like ghosts on a mission. Down through Germany he went, then Austria, Hungary, Serbia, village after village, town after town, country after country, until he arrived in Turkey. As he traversed the Anatolian peninsula, the crowds became slower, denser, more indifferent. They were totally focussed on their goal now, heads down, ploughing grimly against him towards that incredibly distant railway station in Berlin. By the time he reached the frontier with Syria, no one was interested in his inane little enquiry any more, much less the photo. It was always at this point that he had the same terrible realisation. He'd gone the wrong way. He should be in Italy. And because of that, it was almost certainly too late.

He awoke with a start.

He rubbed his eyes and swung his feet over the side of the bed. A nice sunny Tuesday morning. Ten minutes till his alarm went off, but he wouldn't need that any more, he was already full of adrenalin. He stood up and stretched.

Today was going to be different. Apart from anything else, today was *resignation day*. He picked up the single piece of junk mail from his front door, tossed it onto the sofa and went into the bathroom, showered, shaved, and combed his blond curly hair, stooping slightly, as usual, so he could see in the mirror. He ate two Weetabix in front of the television – *Good Morning Britain* was on, and the woman with the fez and the golden armlet had been longlisted for yet another literary prize – and surveyed his surroundings. Nothing worth remembering, really. All anonymous. And this was the last thing he'd ever do here: eat a bog-standard TV breakfast with a couple of newsreaders. Afterwards, when he was at a safe distance from Britain, he'd ring his mum. Ask her to put his things in storage for him, please. Or bin them. Mostly they weren't worth keeping, not even for sentimental reasons.

Anyway, he was only thirty-one. Plenty of time to accrue new rubbish if he wanted it. Better rubbish, even. The best.

He positioned himself about a metre from the window where he couldn't be seen and looked cautiously down into the street. Yes, there he was. About forty, Caucasian, big overcoat, slight paunch. Mitchell, he was called, apparently. One of twenty men and women who took turns to watch him or his flat. None of them was much good. He'd made the first nearly a fortnight ago. Six days later, he knew all their names.

And of course, that's why it would be safest to escape when he got to work. It'd be what they were least expecting.

Which didn't mean they weren't expecting it at all, oh no. They'd budgeted for every possibility, even the unlikely.

He put the kettle on and had two strong cups of tea, then donned his best suit – go out in style, that was his motto – and a pair of brown brogues, and he was ready. Time to head for the proverbial office.

He thought he'd be able to walk straight outside without feeling anything, but a sticky web of memories caught him just as he was about to open the door. It wasn't a big flat, so everything of note had happened just behind him, here in his living room. He took one last look: dim echoes of occasional visits by colleagues and family. Nothing outwardly interesting, but each

one – because of what he did for a living, the fact that people didn't usually get across his threshold without excellent reasons – imbued with a special, unique significance.

And Phyllis. Ah, dear, yes. His heart turned over slightly and he exhaled a sigh. She'd been here. More than anyone else. She'd be at work now. His workplace. Their shared workplace, till today.

He probably wouldn't see her, though. She tended to avoid him now.

Good or bad? He didn't know.

If things had been different, he'd have fought back. Told her he loved her and so on. Flowers, texts, entreaties, public self-debasements, the works. But that wasn't possible any more. Not given Mabel.

He grabbed himself by the inner scruff of the neck, walked out onto the landing and locked the door behind him. Then downstairs and out of the building. He caught the usual bus to Lambeth Bridge, sat in his usual seat and used his phone to read his usual newspaper surrounded by the usual commuters in their usual clothes wearing their usual sour expressions. Somewhere rural, they'd probably have been his friends: after all, they'd been travelling to work together every day for the last four years. But this was London. No one did 'nice to see you again' here, not without cast-iron sureties. It usually ended in a stabbing, or that's what they thought. For all he knew, they might even be right.

Two seats behind him, Cordelia, a young black woman in a suit, sat pretending to read a novel. Another of his dear shadows. Oh, how he'd miss them.

He - and she - got off at the river embankment and walked briskly along Millbank. When he entered MI7 Headquarters at Thames House by its large gothic front door, she kept going. Doubtless she'd find her way inside later, maybe even by a different entrance. Meanwhile, Colin, the receptionist, was dealing with what looked like a group of policemen in plain clothes.

How did Mordred know they were policemen? Experience, partly: you learned to recognise types in this job. But also because, when he thought about it, he knew why they were here. They were here for him. They were going to arrest him.

In the normal course of things, he was expected to check in. But Colin knew him by sight, and this was his last day. What could anyone do? The police certainly wouldn't come after him, not on his way in. No, it was getting out again that would likely pose the problem.

He exchanged greetings with junior colleagues on his way to Ruby Parker's office. *Hello John, morning Steph; morning John, good to see you Guy; Hi John nice suit, hi Suki thank you; morning, morning; hello, morning, good morning.*

And then he was there. He knocked. Ruby Parker called 'enter'. He went inside.

A small black woman, probably in her mid- to late-fifties, probably in a skirt-suit although he couldn't see her bottom half since she was sitting behind her desk and didn't dignify his entry by standing. She looked as happy to see him as the people on the bus on the way in, but probably even less so on the inside. If she felt as she'd recently told him she did, she was doing an excellent job of hiding her antipathy.

"Good morning, John," she said.

"Just came to tell you I'm on my way now," he replied.

"You're adamant?" Spoken as if even she didn't know whether it was a question.

"Unless you've had a change of heart."

"Absolutely not. What I meant was, you're aware that this is almost certainly a one-way street?"

"We've had this discussion. What would you do in my position?"

She smiled thinly. "You're right. We *have* had this discussion. Good bye then, John. I won't wish you luck, for obvious reasons."

He closed the door behind him. Now it was just a case of getting out of here. Past the Annabels and the Alecs, in the first instance. Then the police.

Easy peasy.

*Episode 2: Six weeks before the present day. The Mediterranean Sea, 200 miles off the Libyan coast.*

10pm and the Odyssey was bustling. In Room OR2 another surgical operation was nearing a successful conclusion and 23-year-old Mabel Mordred and her 30-year-old colleague and lover, Jean-Marc Bouchet, were ordered to take a quick tea-break in the ship's mess. On a busy day, like today, everyone took it in turns to eat and grab an hour or two's sleep. No one had yet turned in for bed – *Médecins Sans Frontières* personnel were used to long shifts - but food was easier to procure, and just as important for concentration.

Cheese and tomato rolls and coffee. The two ate and drank in silence for the first minute because they were very hungry. Mabel had a pale complexion, black hair tied up in a bun, large eyes and thin mouth. A year ago, she'd been halfway to a first class medical degree at Cambridge when somehow – a kind of mental collapse? she still didn't know - the full horror of the Syrian refugee crisis seemed to reach out and demand her on-the-spot presence *without delay*: come exactly as you are, ask no questions, don't even stop to gather your things. She dropped everything as if in response to a divine command, qualified precipitately as a nurse and joined MSF.

By contrast, Jean-Marc was the finished article: a graduate of the *Université de Montpellier* with four years' surgical experience, an established ability to subordinate moral importunity to practical possibility, and the authority of a conventional career-path behind him. Tall, with short hair, small ears and perfect teeth, he ate leisurely as if making the most of his fare.

Nine hours earlier, the Odyssey had come across a Zodiac, a rubber dinghy with sixty people aboard. Ninety minutes' later, it had been hailed by a German commercial vessel with three hundred and forty people to transfer. Since then, there had been one baby delivered, six broken limbs mended, a variety of minor surgeries, and all the routine treatment of dehydration, scabies, dysentery, fuel burns, excrement-caked flesh. The ship was an ex-merchant vessel, chartered from a firm in Bonn and with a crew of Croatians who tended to keep their distance from the refugees. Behind the mess was a small morgue and three operating rooms. The hospital was a portable cabin on deck. Right now, most of the migrants were down in the hold. The ship was on its way back to Messina.

After satisfying their initial hunger, the two medics talked about the problems and practicalities of the latest rescue for five minutes, then got up. Before they parted, Jean-Marc took Mabel's arm.

"I've been thinking about Libya again," he said brusquely. "I've changed my mind."

"About what?" Mabel said.

"You're not coming. It's too dangerous."

"Er, hang on, I think we - "

"We can't talk about this now. I just wanted to prepare you. We'll discuss it later."

They parted without further comment and went to their respective duties. Thankfully, the ops were all done. What remained was aftercare and encouragement. She felt too angry to offer much of the latter. Then, recognising this, she felt guilty. She was a nurse. Her personal issues had no place here.

But still.

What the hell did he mean, *you're not coming*? Who was *he* to decide what *she* should do? If she wanted to go to Libya ... she would. Wouldn't she?

No. No, she wouldn't.

Because he was right. The time of reckoning had come. Completely out of the blue. But it had. She'd always known it might.

She could see what it entailed. Even through a film of bitter tears. He'd get back together with Rima, obviously. Rima was his wife, she'd given birth to his son; he'd believed she was dead, killed in an airstrike near Daraa on her way to the border – and now here she was again, in Libya, a full year later.

Of course he'd go back to her. It was the right thing. He had to do the right thing.

And she had to let him.

Why hadn't Rima called him before? Why wait a year?

Because she'd been injured, that's why. And she believed he was dead.

And neither of them *was* dead. They were both *alive* and now they had a whole shared *life* together in front of them! *Hooray!* It was the happiest of happy endings.

For everyone except poor, pathetic Mabel Mordred.

She was due a fortnight's holiday next week. They'd been planning to go to Libya together, fetch Rima and Hassan and ... What?

Actually, what specifically *had* they been planning to do? In that war-zone? More particularly, what had *he* been planning to do? "Hi, Rima, I know you're my wife, and this is my son, and I know you thought I'd been killed and so on, but I'd like you to meet the new woman in my life. She's ten years younger than you and she's called Mabel."

"Hi, Rima. I'm Mabel. Sorry I slept with your husband, but in all fairness, you were supposed to be dead."

What then? *Rima, I want a divorce* was unthinkable. Either Jean-Marc could see that or he couldn't. If he could, he should have spoken up by now. *Mabel, it's over* would have been his best option, brutal but moral. If he couldn't, he probably wasn't worth sticking around for. Either he was a thug or an idiot.

A complete bloody mess. But at least her immediate course of action was clear. She had to cut all ties with him.

Love – what did that have to do with anything?

Thirty minutes later, she turned in for an hour's sleep. She was the only person aboard who had the luxury of a single cabin – 'luxury': big enough for a bed and a foot of floor-space - and only because she was so young and everyone here felt a little sorry for her, the once exceptionally promising doctor cut down, by her own hand, to ten-a-penny nurse-status. She climbed into her bunk and cried.

After an hour, the knock at her door she'd been half expecting. She'd exhausted her well of tears now and had her words prepared. Might as well get it over with.

"It's not what you think," Jean-Marc said when she opened the door.

She scoffed. Of all the hackneyed phrases.

"It's over," she said, returning cliché for cliché.

"Rima re-married."

"Er, what?"

"She thought I was dead. She met another man. They married. Obviously, she's got to 'divorce' me, but we were never married under French law, so that shouldn't be too problematic. The boy's almost certainly mine, of course. She wants me to help her get her new family into Europe. It's the least I can do."

"Why - why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"We never get to talk here. Not properly, of course we don't. Can I come in?"

She stood aside. He sat on the bed, pulled her down next to him and kissed her.

"What's she doing in Libya?" Mabel asked, disengaging herself. No good allowing herself to be seduced. She had to think. It might well be bullshit.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"I mean, everyone knows nearly all the Syrians are going north now. Egypt's turned inhospitable and Libya's a basket-case. Everyone we've been picking up in the Med for months

has been Eritrean, Libyan or sub-Saharan. Why did Rima risk bringing her son to the Maghreb?"

"You'd have to ask her husband. They're southern Syrians, from just above the Jordanian border. It was probably easier to head that way rather than Turkey. Maybe they went south and just decided to keep on walking. After all, Zaatari's full, the Mrajeeb Al Fhood camp's got a reputation." He shrugged. "It's academic, anyway. They're here now. I've got to get them out."

"I thought we were going to do it together."

"I wasn't thinking when I said that. I don't want you getting harmed. It's dangerous enough for me. Your presence won't achieve anything."

"Why can't they get on a boat? And we'd meet them?"

He smiled. "We're not a pickup service. Even if we were: cash. They haven't any."

"What's your plan exactly?"

"I'll have to get Rima and Hassan out first on the pretext that we're married and he's my son. Her husband will have to come later. He accepts that."

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "Where does this leave *us*?"

"I love you. You know that. Look, I really can't tell you how sorry I am. If I'd had the slightest suspicion that Rima might be alive, I'd never have got involved with you – or anyone. For both our sakes. As for 'us', you're entitled to have second thoughts about me, I agree. All you have to do is say the word and I'll pack my bags. After this mission, you never need see me again. It'll be horrible – for me – but I'll understand."

"I don't want that."

"I love you, Mabel. Just give me a few weeks and I'll sort everything out, I promise."

"Does Rima – know about us?"

"It was the first thing I told her. A confession. But – but she was delighted. That's the main reason I thought it'd be good for you to accompany me to Libya. She's desperate to meet you. I let her enthusiasm get the better of me, I'm afraid, but now I'm seeing things in a more sober light, I realise it's a bad idea. She says the media's exaggerating the dangers, but it isn't. She's just got used to conflict, that's all."

"I hope I *can* meet her. Not necessarily in Libya."

"We can Skype her any time you like. It's probably a bit late now, but tomorrow."

"Does she speak English?"

"A little. And you've got a little Arabic. Together, you'll bridge the language barrier."

"What part of Libya's she living in?"

"Tripoli."

Mabel nodded. Everywhere in Libya was bad, but it could be worse. Like Sirte, where ISIS was. Or Benghazi where General Haftar's LNA was having it out with the Revolutionary Shura Council.

They didn't say any more. Magically, it was beginning to feel all right again. Outside, the wind picked up. The thrum of the engine and the sound of happy voices somewhere along the corridor augmented her reassurance. There was nothing more to say, not yet. She lay on the bed, and he lay beside her. After a few minutes, they fell asleep. It had been an exhausting day.

They awoke to the blare of the klaxon that doubled as an emergency call. Outside the cabin, people were running. The door opened with a bang and Bjorn stood there, a forty-something Swede with black hair, circular-lens glasses and a goatee. His job was to round up the sleepers.

"Come on, Lovebirds!" he barked.

Difficult to tell whether there was disapproval in his voice. No reason for it. Everyone aboard knew about them. They leapt up as if they'd been doing something wrong only because they were half asleep. They put one foot robotically in front of the other and followed their colleagues to the upper deck.

“We can’t take any more passengers surely,” Mabel heard Jean-Marc saying. “We’ve got a full complement.”

“Captain’s scuppered his ship,” Bjorn replied. He left the corollary unspoken. In that case, except in the most extreme circumstances, ‘full’ or not, MSF was bound to help.

It happened a lot. The captain of a particularly clapped-out migrant boat breached his hull to force a passing ship into a rescue-mission. A severely overloaded unreliable vessel could only make headway so long as its load remained evenly spread. Once people realised they were sinking, they panicked. For that reason, usually, lots of them drowned.

When Mabel and Jean-Marc emerged on deck, it was dark. They could just see the boat’s outline off the starboard bow, going round in ever decreasing circles like an insect whose abdomen had been crushed. People were yelling and screaming, lots already in the sea.

The Odyssey came alongside and ropes were thrown, lifeboats lowered. The distressed vessel was a wooden fishing sloop, almost underwater now. In the deck’s centre, people clambered out of an exit from the lower levels. No one was helping: the reverse: they seemed to be standing on each other, or dragging one another down or backwards in an effort to get out before the boat sank, pulling them down with it. Mostly, the little that could be seen of them through the gloom, they looked manic.

“Look after this for me,” Mabel heard someone next to her say. A phone was thrust into her hand. Whoever it was grabbed a rope and jumped off the side. A second later, he was on the deck of the doomed boat, taking people’s arms and wrenching them to safety from the hold. It was a lost battle for most of those down there: they’d probably already drowned.

She looked at the phone then at the person doing the heroics and suddenly she realised it was Jean-Marc. Her stomach flipped and she shouted his name at the top of her voice as if that would help.

Looking back later, she thought she must have had a premonition. At that precise moment, something unheard-of happened. The boat’s deck seemed to split lengthwise. Everyone aboard lurched in every direction and mostly ended in the water. The boat sank as quickly as if someone was pulling it from beneath. Jean-Marc and everyone in his immediate surrounds simply disappeared below the surface.

Meanwhile, the Croatian crew were forcing their way between the medics and the rails. They’d seen Jean-Marc and they weren’t about to allow a repeat performance. Ropes and lifejackets and rubber rings, yes, and they were happy to help. Personnel, no.

The first migrants were already coming aboard now. Bjorn grabbed Mabel by the shoulders and made her look at him.

“You’ve got a job to do,” he told her firmly. “OR2. Go now.”

She looked at him as if he was mad.

“Now!” he yelled.

Of course, yes. But couldn’t he see she’d be no good until – that she had to - ?

But she was already moving in the required direction.

She was in shock. She recognised the symptoms. She’d be no good to anyone like this and five minutes later, Bjorn himself clearly reached the same conclusion. He found her as she was putting on a pair of surgical gloves and told her to go to the mess. One of the Croatians had been told to keep an eye on her. A tall muscular man in a blue overall, he sat her down solemnly at one of the tables, took up position opposite her and folded his arms. He didn’t speak. A cup of strong tea appeared apparently from nowhere.

Thirty minutes later, Celine appeared in green surgical kit and gloves. Celine Dufour: they’d spent an hour talking back in Messina while they were waiting for the Odyssey’s all-clear. She looked emotional. She sat down next to Mabel and took her hand. She wiped her eyes with her free sleeve.

“I’ve some terrible news,” she said.



Mabel lost track of time after that. They took her up on deck to see Jean-Marc's body before its transfer to the morgue. But this was a major disaster: lots of people had died, and it would probably be on the front pages of all the newspapers tomorrow.

It wasn't until she got back to Messina and she was finally alone for the first time that she realised she had his phone. She waited till a day later, when she was on the bus to Rome, to access it. She sat next to an old man in a beret. Outside, the scenery passed in a haze of olive groves and arid hills. *5 new messages.*

None from his parents, thank God. No, they were all from Rima.

Rima. All that was left of Jean-Marc now.

Her mind went blank for a moment and then it was like a shaft of light had burst in. Suddenly, she knew exactly what she had to do. My God, it was so obvious.

And she was travelling in the wrong direction!

*Episode 3: Four weeks before the present day. St John's Gardens, London, 1pm*

A shady meeting in a park, a brief exchange of information, an abrupt departure – the stuff of espionage stories everywhere. Only this one was different. Yes, they were spies; yes, their behaviour followed the rubric, or it soon would. But they both worked for the same organisation, and in the same department, and at the same pay-scale. Two well-dressed women in their early thirties; one blonde, petite and straight-backed; the other much taller, dark-haired, with more of the *haute couture* about her, even though her clothes were understated: a beige skirt-suit and matching heels.

"I take it there's a problem between you and John," Annabel, the blonde woman said when her friend sat on the bench next to her.

"You could say that," Phyllis replied evasively. She hadn't planned on meeting a colleague here, but there was no escaping once their eyes met. And Annabel was the last person she wanted to talk to about John. Was her being here an accident? Who could tell? The one thing everyone said about her was that she was opaque. Even her husband agreed.

"What do you have in your sandwiches?" Annabel asked.

"Fish paste. You?"

"Cucumber. Always the same. Three slices per sandwich. And a tiny little film of butter."

How to keep a conversation about cucumber sandwiches going? Not possible. But they couldn't just sit here in silence. In the course of wondering how to obviate the silence, however, quite a lot of silence actually occurred, and when the time came to break it, Phyllis realised it wasn't so objectionable. She held her tongue. She could very happily spend the next ten, fifteen minutes – however long it took – like this.

"What about your drink?" Annabel asked.

"Water."

"Me too."

More silence. Annabel removed a small plastic bottle from her bag and took a sip. She put the top back and resumed her cucumber sandwich. The clouds parted. She put on a pair of sunglasses. Not at all the sort of thing Phyllis would have expected: the frames were subtly heart-shaped. Probably best to pay them a compliment.

"They look very stylish," she said.

"Miu Miu 54 RS Noir," Annabel replied. "Hand crafted in Italy."

"Wow."

"They're no reflection on me. I didn't even choose them, Tariq did. He paid two hundred pounds for them, which is a complete waste of money, but I couldn't tell him that, because they were a present."

"No, of course not."

“Don’t you tell him, please. If you see him.”

“I won’t.”

Annabel laughed. “Sorry, I don’t know why I said that. What has John done?” she went on, reverting to her original subject. “You two seemed to be getting along so well together. I had really high hopes for you. I trust it was nothing to do with the villa?”

“The villa was lovely, thank you. No, it was nothing to do with that.”

“You don’t have to tell me. It’s just, I’m probably your closest colleague, added to which I’m female, and I know John pretty well - what a complete oddball he can be - so I thought I might be able to empathise, and you might appreciate that, and it might make you happier.”

“Thank you.”

“Obviously, if you choose to confide in me, I won’t tell anyone.”

All the time she spoke, Annabel looked straight ahead – even with her sunglasses on it was possible to tell that – and so there was no eye-contact designed to facilitate a confession. It was all completely impersonal, and almost certainly genuine. Annabel was constructed in such a way that, on a deep level, she probably wasn’t remotely interested in The John and Phyllis Problem. And yet she really did want to help. She considered it her duty.

“It all went very well for a while,” Phyllis said, biting the bullet. “Then I went to meet his family.”

“Always a testing time.”

“Oh, you betcha.”

“Surely, you’ve met them before?” Annabel said. “Hannah, the pop impresario? Charlotte the bespoke candle-maker? There’s another one, as well: a prize-winning novelist. Julie, I think.”

“Julia. That’s right. And another. Mabel. She wasn’t there.”

“And his mother and father, of course. Where did you meet them? At home in Hexham? Or were his parents in London to see *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*?”

“I didn’t know that was on.”

“I’m not sure it is. I simply chose it as an example. They love coming down to London to see a show and meet their son. His mother always gives him a twenty-pound note as a goodbye-present when she’s on her way back up north. ‘Towards the electricity bill’, she says. Incredibly touching. Anyway, what did they do wrong?”

Phyllis raised her eyebrows in a ‘what *didn’t* they do wrong’ way. “I went to his parents’ house in Hexham. First mistake. I was outnumbered six-to-one on unfamiliar territory. And they’re all hard-line Remainers. And mostly Labourites. I counted at least two Corbynistas.”

“Whereas you’re a proud Conservative and committed Brexiteer. I see the problem.”

“I didn’t *have* to say anything. I could have held my tongue. I suppose.”

Annabel laughed. “Did alcohol play any part?”

“A small one, but none of us was drunk. They just went *on* and *on* about what a disaster it was, and how you’d have to have been *stupid* to vote Leave, and what the chances were of provoking a second referendum so *justice* could actually be done, and so on and so forth. In the end, I just snapped. It didn’t start off as a blazing row, but it quickly escalated into one.”

“I wish I could have been a fly on the wall. It sounds hilarious.”

“Maybe one day it will be. Right now, it’s too raw.”

“I didn’t think John was a passionate either-sider. I always imagine him more worried about pigeons and donkeys.”

Phyllis shook her head. “At least he’s not like bloody Hannah or self-satisfied Charlotte or stuck-up Julia.”

“So you dumped him. He didn’t dump you.”

“Correct. We’re too different. Oh, I’m sure he can *live* with the fact that I’m a Brexiteer and I’m not a vegetarian and I don’t give all my money to Oxfam and Christian Aid. But for how

long? There comes a point at which you've got to ask: what's the actual basis of the relationship? If your values are that different, you're probably heading for a fall."

"The sex was all right, though?"

Phyllis rolled her eyes. "People always say that as if it's a significant consideration. I'm an attractive woman, Annabel. I've been a bloody model, for God's sake. I expect good sex as standard. It's not necessarily any kind of gateway to a meaningful future."

"John's miserable, if it's any consolation."

"I know he is. I know we both are. But I'm not a teenager. I've got to consider my future with *this*." She tapped her temple.

They lapsed back into silence again. Annabel finished her sandwiches and drank more water. "Our meeting here was no accident," she said eventually.

Phyllis sighed. Of course it wasn't.

"I meant what I said about wanting to help," Annabel went on. "You *are* my friend, Phyllis. Probably the best I've ever had."

Phyllis turned to look at her. She felt both deeply moved and betrayed at the same time. She suddenly wanted to cry, which was rare for her. "Ruby Parker asked you to have a word with me for some reason," she hazarded. "Is that it?" It was all it could be. Annabel didn't run errands for anyone beneath a Head of Section. She certainly wouldn't be here on John's behalf.

"That's right," Annabel replied.

Phyllis ground her teeth, then sat back. "I'm listening."

"You noticed the younger sister, Mabel, wasn't there when you met the family. The fact is, right now, she's in Libya. 'Unknown abductors' have commandeered her phone – almost certainly militiamen of some stripe, although that doesn't say much: there are about five hundred miniature armies in Libya now - and they've been in touch with John. They don't know he's a spy, obviously, because Mabel doesn't know. But they do know he goes abroad a lot, and they're convinced they can use him. He 'sells machine parts', if you remember: that's what he tells his family. To cut a long story short, they're demanding money – lots of it - and gun-running. For starters. Anyway, Blue are sending a rescue team. Knowing Blue, it'll probably go wrong. The point is, John's been making noises to suggest he wants to go out there alone. Ruby Parker's having none of it, of course. She's fobbed him off with the Blue op for now, but I understand he's already issued her with an ultimatum. She wants us all to keep an eye on him."

Phyllis put the last of her sandwich away. She didn't feel hungry any more. "My God. Poor John."

"Poor Mabel."

"She didn't go over there – to Libya - voluntarily, then?"

"Stranger things have happened. But no. She was lured by the wife of a man she was in a relationship with. The man died unexpectedly, right in front of her eyes, shortly before she left Europe, just under a fortnight ago. The theory is, the woman presented herself as a would-be migrant, and Mabel went to help her get into Italy. We don't know how genuine the woman is. In all likelihood, she's been kidnapped too. It's a booming industry in Tripoli."

"I'm not re-starting my relationship with John, if that's what Ruby Parker thinks. That wouldn't be right. What sort of 'ultimatum' did he give her?"

"A resignation one."

"That's it then. He's leaving. She's not going to cave in to blackmail. I wouldn't."

"That's the strange thing about John Mordred and Ruby Parker. They're two of a kind. Both incredibly stubborn."

"What a tragedy," Phyllis said sadly.

"As I say, she wants us all to keep an eye on him."

"With a view to what?"

“Stopping him going, of course. Not stopping him resigning. That’s a done deal.”

“It’s utterly bloody childish. As you rightly say, they’re two of a kind.”

Annabel stood up. “Well, I’m heading back to Tracy Island now. Coming?”

“I’ll just sit here for a moment, if that’s okay. Get my thoughts together.”

“Would you like me to stay?”

“No, no: you go ahead. I won’t be long.” It was the last thing she wanted. And she could tell Annabel wasn’t serious. She’d delivered her package; time to get back to the sorting office. No, best to be alone.

Annabel left without a backwards glance. Phyllis gave the rest of her sandwich to the pigeons. She knew she wasn’t supposed to, but it was what John would do, and she didn’t know quite how she felt about him now. After that meeting with his family, she’d felt sullied somehow. The things she believed in – the essential decency of Theresa May, the merciful escape Brexit had been, the sordid grubbiness of Jean-Claude Juncker – had been trampled. Well, apart from the last one. And John hadn’t stood up for her. He’d been more interested in ‘keeping the peace’. Which meant he was on *their* side, really. Obviously he was.

As for MI7, Ruby Parker would regret digging her heels in as soon as he was out of the door – she probably thought he was bluffing – and from then on, things would get progressively worse. And Annabel was no kind of friend. Of her other colleagues, Edna and Ian were seven years younger than her. Alec was ten years older. The work was okay, but she could do better.

The more she thought about it, the more she could see that although there were lots of courses open to her now, her best by far was to take a leaf out of John’s book. Time for a fresh start. The country had got one, and fate had thrown her an identical opportunity.

The key to resigning was to make it absolutely clear that hers was an independent decision. She wasn’t doing it out of sympathy for John, much less in solidarity with him. No, she’d taken a good look at herself and decided she’d be better off striking out on a fresh path. Some kind of business venture; it didn’t matter what. She could plan that while she was seeing out her notice. And she could go anywhere. She’d had her fill of London. Somewhere provincial where people were a bit friendlier.

Anywhere but Hexham.

## Chapter 2: Whoops, There Goes Gravity

Mordred took the lift to the first floor and turned left along the corridor that led to the rear of the building. Not a moment to lose: Ruby Parker had just ordered his immediate detention.

Till now she'd held the fewest cards. She'd accepted he was about to resign, but didn't know the precise time or manner. Your classic phoney war. She didn't want to be the one to make the first real move – all those agents watching his flat notwithstanding - because there was always the slim possibility he might have a change of heart. Even today, going into her office, the humble climb-down was still a theoretical possibility, otherwise she'd have had a roughneck visibly on hand to escort him to the police, down in reception.

Only when the clock stopped ticking on his notice and the word 'goodbye' passed his lips – those two things together, not either singly - could she be absolutely certain. She'd be on the phone right now, mustering a posse.

Its purpose, of course, would be to convey him into the waiting arms of the counter-terrorism officers on the ground floor. Naturally, no one could prove he was on his way to Libya, even less that he was in thrall to terrorists – GCHQ had full remote access to his phone, and all his conversations were being monitored at his own request. No, he was in the clear as regards all that. What they *could* legally do was hold him for fourteen days without charge. By which time, going by last time's fiasco, Mabel would be dead.

Not that anyone in MI7 would intend that, obviously. Yet they'd all walk away when it happened.

He didn't have that luxury.

One of the first rules of effective spycraft: always do startling things in plain sight. Well, not always. Sometimes. About 30% of the time. He walked deep into the building – probably the last thing they were expecting - and took out six metres of high-tensile wire he'd stowed in his pocket earlier that week, plus a pair of heavy-duty gloves.

He carried on past colleagues' offices, desks, standalone workstations - *hello, hello again, hello* – until he reached the west wall. He threw open the window to Thorney Street. He secured the loop he'd made to the opening-restrictor-stay and climbed out. There were a few surprised calls behind him, but, hey, this was John Mordred: he did odd things.

Four metres to the ground: he probably didn't need a mooring. Still, it should reinforce their preconceived idea that he was incompetent, which would be useful later. He disengaged the wire with a deft flick of the wrist and rolled it up as he walked. He thrust it, and the gloves, into his pocket. At either end of the street, Annabel and Alec were on their way towards him with walkie-talkies, as expected. They accelerated. He broke into a run.

Page Street, directly ahead, looked clear – of course it did. They'd foreseen something like this and organised an ambush. What they didn't know was that he'd anticipated their anticipation. For now, just run as fast as you can: forget your pursuers and concentrate on what's ahead. His worst fear was that they might set Edna on him, the school panther. She could probably outrun him within a hundred yards, although if he threw obstacles in her way – well, she was relatively new to this job: that didn't seem fair.

But then he remembered: Edna had pulled a ligament. Thank you, God.

Which didn't make any difference to the possibility of an ambush. Phyllis, yes, it'd be her. She'd stick out a well-timed, shapely foot, and when he went sprawling: *Why the hurry to LEAVE, John? Much better to REMAIN*. Then she'd laugh humourlessly.

No, she wouldn't. They'd had a tiff, that's all. He loved her. They still had an understanding of sorts. One that precluded that kind of thing. He hoped.

There were men at the end of Page Street, waiting for him. So far, so good. He pretended to recalculate and leapt over a couple of bins into the side-street they were obviously shepherding him towards.

He found the expected open door to his left and slipped inside. They were probably rubbing their hands with glee now.

They obviously had no idea how thoroughly he'd studied this building. Memorising the architect's plans; locating the exits; learning the name of each worker in every office, even gauging the proximity of adjacent buildings for a viable rooftop-to-rooftop.

As soon as he entered, he saw the possibility of a bonus. The cleaners' cupboard was open. He went in. No handle on this side, but he grabbed the edge and pulled it as far shut as it would go. To his relief, it wasn't one of those doors with a life of its own.

Alec was ten years older than him, and they'd probably be evenly matched in a fight. He could outrun him, though. Annabel was another matter. He didn't know how speedy she was, but there was absolutely no possibility of besting her in combat. She'd have him for breakfast.

"Could he have gone in here?" he heard Alec call, theatrically, from outside.

"I don't know," Annabel replied, equally artificially. "Go in and have a look. I'll go to the end. If I can't see him, I may come back."

Sure, yes. She'd be waiting right outside. Alec was just the squeeze-guy. The police would blockade the front; to evade them, Mordred would have to back up and fight past Alec; Annabel would join Alec. Checkmate in three.

But with game-plans like that, you never reckoned with a cleaners' cupboard.

He waited till Alec was just outside, then he slammed the door into him. He followed up with a deft kick to the head. He leaped over the unconscious bulk and banged the exit on Annabel while she was on her way in.

She'd be bloody furious next time they met. If they ever did.

According to the script, Counter-terrorism should be coming now, or at least half of it. But that didn't matter either. All part of life's rich tapestry. He went leisurely upstairs to the first floor, walked across the landing and knocked on the door of Office 14. Credibility now was of the essence: one reason he was wearing his best suit. Without waiting for a reply, he opened the door and walked in.

A spacious office with white woodchip wallpaper, framed landscapes and an elderly man at a desk dictating to a middle-aged woman with a laptop. Fourth time he'd been in here; first time with occupants.

"Morning, Nigel," Mordred said breezily, closing the door gently behind him. "Morning, Linda. May I just ask, can either of you smell burning? How was Eastbourne, incidentally?"

Nigel and Linda looked nonplussed. Their embarrassment at not even recognising him when he obviously knew them intimately was just what the doctor ordered. He smiled while each waited for the other to provide a clue as to who he was.

He opened the window casually - crucial not to make any sudden movements here, and of course to keep as quiet as he could - and looked down into the street. Five policemen gathered directly below, next to the doorway, in a clutch. Their body-language said they thought the chase was over.

Perfect. He hadn't been ten-pin bowling for a while, but he understood the basic principle. Everyone did.

"Do we - er? ... Have we met?" the elderly man said, cautiously genial.

"Excuse me just one moment, Nigel," Mordred replied. He took the wire from his pocket, unravelled it and found the pen-mark indicating the exact distance from here to four feet above the ground. He put his gloves on, attached the loop to the window restraining-stay and jumped.

The height was great enough - and he spread himself sufficiently - to knock all five officers down under the impact. Because the wire was adapted to stop him hitting the ground, he experienced a severe jerk, but no more than in the six practice-runs. He punched one of the men who was groggily getting up, then found his feet and ran.

He zig-zigged through the alleyways and found Regency Street, then up Fynes Street to Vincent Square. He slowed to a jog – he wasn't being followed – and climbed inside the grounds.

Vincent Square wasn't a public space; it belonged to Westminster School. And for that reason, once you knew where the CCTV cameras were and how to avoid the patrolling support staff, it was ideal for concealment. He crossed to the thicket where he'd buried his change of clothing and two hundred pounds in cash.

Disguise, disguise, oh the possibilities. The convention was to go as far the other way as possible: if you wore a suit, then a T-shirt and baseball cap, and vice-versa. To avoid that cliché, he'd brought another suit, a dark, double-breasted one. He cut his hair – one of his most recognisable features - and shaved his scalp, and put on a pair of plastic-framed glasses and a dark trilby. He crossed the field by the perimeter trees and left via the north fence.

He couldn't find a taxi, so he hopped on the first bus he saw. Ten minutes later, he was in Oxford Street. Not his first choice of destination – quite the opposite - but he could see from the route map between the wall and the ceiling overhead that, if he stayed on, he'd get ever closer to Thames House. He had to change, find a bus that went north.

MI7 would be trying to get a lock on his phone now. They couldn't succeed so long as it was switched off, so he was safe for the moment. It wouldn't hurt them to find out where he was, because he wouldn't be staying here, and he had to put one part of his plan to bed.

Four days ago, he'd arranged to meet his two older sisters in Selfridges for breakfast. MI7 knew he'd resign today; an appointment with family members an hour later was meant to put it off its guard. Since it was paranoid by nature, it would still set a trap for him in Page Street, that had been obvious. But it would be a half-hearted one, and he'd evade it.

And he had. So far.

He walked down the street towards Marble Arch with Selfridges behind him. He switched on his phone and pressed 'call'. None of his family knew about Mabel. As far as they were concerned she was still merrily hauling migrants from dinghies. So he expected Hannah to sound more cheerful than him. At least, until she found out she'd been stood up.

"John, you're *late*," her voice came. "Charlotte's gone out onto the street to look for you. There's a limit to how long we can stay here with the queue like this. Do you want to meet in Starbucks or something, instead?"

"I can't be there at all, I'm afraid. Something's come up at work."

"Oh, fabulous," she replied sardonically. "Have the Americans and the French run out of machine parts again?"

"I'm really sorry. Look, I can't talk now. I promise I'll make it up to you."

"For God's sake, John, I've bought you your *favourite*. I'm sitting here - "

He switched the phone off and put it in a public bin. He wondered what she thought his 'favourite' was. How did she do it? Always make him feel guiltier than he'd budgeted for?

Still, this wasn't the time or place for recriminations. This was about Mabel.

"John! *John!*" A woman's voice behind him.

Charlotte. Bloody hell. Short, stout, hennaed hair, pink-framed glasses and the usual shapeless T-shirt, skirt and zip-up top combination.

"John, you dropped your phone in the bin by mistake!" she exclaimed, beaming and trotting over to hand it back to him. "I knew it was you by the way you walk!" she said before he could ask. "Oh, my God! What have you - ? Where's your *hair*, John? Take that hat off, come on, show me! Oh, my GOD!" she went on, when he did as she asked. "What's the - ? And why are you wearing *glasses*? *Bald!* And *glasses!* Have you – you haven't got – the - *the big C*, have you, John? Oh, my *GOD!*"

She seemed simultaneously overwhelmed with concern and utterly traumatised, and it wasn't clear which would get the upper hand, or whether they'd collide in her brain and cause

an explosion. She held his phone at arm's length as if it was infectious. A few passers-by looked at her, shocked at the brutality of her public diagnosis.

"I'm fine," he said weakly, accepting the phone. "I've got to go."

He really did. She was about to ruin everything. MI7 might well have discovered his location now. Pure instinct kicked in and he ran away, the phone feeling like a white hot bar in his palm.

After ten seconds, he looked hurriedly behind him – he'd lost her, surely – then spotted a red double-decker about to pull away. He was past caring about its destination: for all he knew, it might even be the one he'd just alighted from. He thrust his phone into another City of Westminster bin and slid through the electronic doors just as they were sealing.

The bus pulled out into a miraculously clear lane and accelerated. He paid ten pounds, didn't tell the driver where he wanted to go or whether single or return. He was focussed on just one thing. He ran up to the top deck to see if he could spy his sister.

It was worse than he could possibly imagine. A middle-aged Chinese tourist fished Mordred's phone from the rubbish, looked quizzically at it, then all around himself, solicitously, as if to locate its rightful owner. Then Charlotte appeared from nowhere and leapt on him.

Even from behind the thick glass, he heard her yelling, *"That's my brother's phone! Help! HELP, everyone! HE'S GOT MY BROTHER'S PHONE!"*

Then the bus went up a gear and gathered speed. It turned left onto Park Lane and Oxford Street and disappeared from view.