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ORKNEY TWILIGHT

CLARE CARSON

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT
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CHAPTER 1

21st June 1972

THE DAY SAM realized that her father wasn't quite what he appeared to be was one of those June days when the unexpected heat was making everything shimmer like a mirage. Nothing was quite what it seemed. From where she was standing Sam could see the gleaming cranes and gantries of Tilbury towering like an industrial Oz above the muddy flatlands of Essex, hoists and winches moving magically as if nudged by some unseen hand, giant rusting containers floating weightlessly in the air and, running through it all, the amber pathway of the Thames heading enticingly towards the far horizon. It was like a belated seventh birthday treat. She hadn't expected all this when she had conjured up the list of vague symptoms carefully calibrated to be too bad for school but not quite bad enough for a doctor's appointment. Liz, for once, had lost her rag.

'She is your daughter too, you know,' Liz had shouted up the stairs. 'I can't take her with me again. I'm lecturing today. She'll have to go with you.'

Jim had shouted back down that there was no way he was going to take her to work with him, it wasn't allowed, it was against the rules. But Liz didn't want to know, she didn't care about him and his stupid work and what was allowed and what wasn't, she had a job to do too and she wanted to get on

with it. Liz yelled that as far as she could tell they made their fucking rules up as they went along anyway, and then slammed the door on her way out.

So there she was at Tilbury docks, happily ensconced in Jim's crow's nest office suspended in the scaffolding high up in the stratospheric blue of the sky.

'Don't touch anything,' Jim had said, pacing the restricted rectangle of grey-marbled linoleum, not bothering to disguise his irritation at her presence. She was sitting on his fancy swivel chair, kicking her legs back and forth, making the seat twist around and around. He had watched her impatiently with his steely blue eyes, flicked his wrist, checked his watch, and pointed out the window.

'Look. A kestrel. There's a pair of them nesting up on one of the gantries. It must be hunting for voles to feed the chicks. Keep your eyes peeled and you might see it dive. Don't blink or you'll miss it going in for the kill.'

She had followed the point of his finger and located a distant tawny cruciform speck; an angel of death hovering motionless apart from the just perceptible flutter of its gold-flecked wings. As she stared through the glass she sensed Jim disappearing through the door behind. Alone in his office now she watched the kestrel abandoning whatever prey had been in its sights and looping and looping on a rising warm thermal and she imagined she was the falcon soaring high above the river, surveying the ant-like dockers patrolling the walkways far below. Seeking out the secrets of Tilbury's hinterland. She glanced down, searching for the distinctive curly black mop-top of Jim's head in the sea of steel and concrete but he had vanished and, while she searched vainly for traces of her father, she wondered what he was doing here anyway. What was his part in all of this? What exactly was his job? He had come to work that morning

in his regular brown suit, his big-collared shirt unbuttoned at the neck and his blue tie knotted at half-mast. He didn't bother with stuffy formalities. He was ready to do business. Yet now she was in his workplace she couldn't quite make sense of it all, couldn't see what his business was, couldn't fathom what it was he did here all day. Nothing quite tallied with the story she had been told. She looked over her shoulder at his tiny office: locked filing cabinets, avocado Olivetti typewriter, piles of envelopes, paper, notebooks, boxes of bulldog clips, rubber bands of assorted sizes. The hard glare of the sun revealed the icing of dust covering all of his accoutrements. She surveyed the room thoughtfully and in her head she itemized what was there, what she had expected to find, what was missing.

'Dad,' she said after he had returned from his forty-minute mystery jaunt, 'What do you do here?'

He cocked one eyebrow. 'A bit of this, a bit of that.'

'But what sort of thing?'

'Keeping an eye on the boats coming in and going out.'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

She tried a different tack. 'Where do the boats come from?'

'All over. North America, Scandinavia. Sometimes Russia.' He put his hands behind his back and stared out the window. 'The third secretary. It's always the third secretary.'

The third secretary? What was he going on about? She glanced at Jim, but he seemed distracted and she decided she could take a risk, ignore his instruction not to touch anything, reached for the enticingly huge and heavy metal Sellotape dispenser, pulled off a long stretch and scrunched it in her hand. Forming the sticky ribbon into the shape of an ant. She peeked furtively at her father while she worked, half expecting him to shout at her, tell her to stop being so wasteful, leave his things

alone, but he wasn't taking any notice of her craft activities. Jim was still eyeing the horizon, lips moving silently, forming unreadable words, incanting some arcane spell. She pulled off another piece of tape.

The second ant had been completed and she was beginning to think he really would spend the rest of the day doing nothing but staring and pacing when the walkie-talkie lurking on top of a filing cabinet crackled into life. He leaped over, grabbed it, retreated to a corner and proceeded to have a conversation with an unseen person somewhere. It was difficult to make out what he was saying. She could hear a lot of swearing and a lot of laughing and she vaguely recognized some of the strange words he uttered – names, foreign names – but they didn't form understandable sentences. None of it really made any sense. She wondered whether he was just mucking about. He was always mucking about.

'Dad,' she said, when he had replaced the radio and they were standing together by the window watching the moving dots on the ground, 'who were you talking to?'

'Harry.'

Harry. Of course. It would be. Harry was Jim's mate. Harry had a broken nose, came from Wales and you would have to be a bit of a thicko even to think about crossing him. She liked Harry. She knew him quite well because he had a habit of turning up at their house late with Jim, kipping on their settee, reeking of what she would one day identify as the smoky perfume of the pub.

'Does Harry work here too?'

Jim grunted confirmation before he turned and grinned in his skew-whiff sort of way that told her he was about to embark on one of his extended jokes and she had better look out for her cues if she wanted to keep up with him.

'Harry is the second man at Tilbury,' he said.

She asked the obvious.

'Well if Harry is the second man, who is the first man?'

'Me. Of course. I'm the first man. And Harry is my second man.'

'Is there anybody else?'

'Nope. There are only two of us; it's just Harry and me.'

She frowned; she was sure there should have been more of them.

He glanced at her slyly. 'Although…'

'What?'

'Well … I do sometimes think we could do with the help of an extra set of eyes. A third man.'

She shrugged, reached for the Sellotape dispenser and carried on with her sculpting while he pondered the ceiling.

Eventually he said, 'You know, I think you could be quite good at this game.'

Her pale eyebrows shot up, surprised by his comment. Was this still part of the joke or something else, something serious? He leaned against a filing cabinet.

'You see, you're not quite as stupid as you look. You sit around hardly saying a word, acting as if you wouldn't harm a fly. Unthreatening. Nobody notices you. Yet you don't miss a thing. You can spot the patterns, the anomalies. Work out what's going on. I suspect you've got a natural talent for it. You must have inherited it from me.'

He tilted his head to one side as if he were making an enquiry rather than issuing a statement.

'But Dad, everybody notices you,' she said, without thinking. He laughed, stood in front of her now, placed the tips of his fingers on the desk.

'Ah. Good point. The thing is; there are two ways of playing

this game.' He moved forwards, blocking the window view, shards of sun radiating like a halo around the darkened outline of his head. 'You can make yourself invisible and hide in the shadows or you can do the opposite, make your presence known, dare anybody to challenge you. Hide in the light.'

Uncertain whether a response was required, she half smiled a doubtful sort of smile. Jim stroked his chin with his thumb and index finger.

'I wonder … could you do it?'

'Do what?'

'Do you think you could be trusted to be the third man?'

She hesitated, running through his question in her head warily, calculating the angles, trying to work out how to join in with his banter, play along.

'Yes,' she said decisively. 'I could be trusted to be the third man.'

'Are you sure about that?' he demanded sharply.

Perhaps she had given the wrong response, made a serious mistake and irritated him with her reply.

'Maybe it's better if I'm not the third man then. I don't think it's a good idea.'

'No, I've made my decision. You are the third man. You can't sit around here all day abusing my stationery supplies. You've got to do something useful. You're the third man whether you like it or not.'

'But Dad—'

'No good getting the heebie-jeebies about it now. Too late.' He guffawed maniacally and suddenly he was off prancing around the cramped space of the tiny office, a carousing rabble-rouser, whirling his arms, flicking up envelopes and scraps of paper with his outstretched fingertips, creating an unseasonal snowstorm, singing 'Three Men Went to Mow', wildly out of tune.

At first she thought his song-and-dance routine was funny but he carried on being the madman just a bit too long and she could detect the familiar creeping edge of menace in his tone that made her wonder whether he really was slightly cracked. She began to wish he would stop, calm down, return to normal. Then she knew she had to tread carefully because she didn't want to tip the balance. She sat silently and smiled at his antics.

'And when you've proved yourself as the third man,' he added when he had run out of steam and was standing by the desk again, 'you can graduate to working at the Foreign Office and you can have a stab at being the third secretary.'

He snorted at his own joke. She laughed too, just to be on the safe side. He stopped snickering and pulled his serious face.

'But you mustn't say anything to anybody. Not a word. Not even to Liz. It's a secret. You must never let on you're part of the team.'

She nodded obediently, noticed he was grinning to himself and decided then it must have been a joke after all, just like everything he ever said was always a bit of a joke, had the touch of a pantomime to it.

And that was the moment when it dawned on her that he wasn't a real policeman at all; it was just another of his funny stories. In that one quick flash, everything – the office, the docks, the sky, the river – had risen up in the air like a disturbed flock of starlings and resettled back on the ground in a completely different formation. Suddenly it was obvious, crystal clear that he had been making it up, having her on. And now she couldn't understand why she had gone along with his line in the first place, why she had told all her friends her dad was a sergeant at some unnamed cop shop, had a truncheon and handcuffs and went around locking up criminals, because now she could see there was absolutely nothing

about Jim to show his story might be true. He didn't wear a uniform. He didn't chase robbers. He didn't arrest people. The facts were as bright and as hard as the gleaming cranes of Tilbury. He couldn't possibly be a proper policeman. The doubts in her stomach that must have been sitting there all along, fermenting like the windfall apples left lying in the grass to rot in their back garden, were becoming uncontainable, rising upward, making her want to puke. She felt the tears welling but she blinked them back because she knew crying made Jim cross. She swallowed hard and ripped another piece of tape from the dispenser.

'Oh I almost forgot,' he said, rummaging in his jacket pocket, 'I've got a present for you.'

He produced a feather, amber and black striped. 'I found it over in the container park. It must be from the kestrel's tail.' He considered its sleek form. 'Funny things, feathers. Who would have thought that something so flimsy and light could be strong enough to keep a bird hovering in mid-air?' He smiled and handed it over. 'Here take it.'

She smiled back. 'Thank you.'

'It's a souvenir from Tilbury.'

She held it up to the light, admiring the fine vanes, the clean, sharp bars of colour, distracted and soothed by its beauty and, as she twiddled the quill between her finger and thumb, she decided that it didn't really matter what he did. Work wasn't that important after all. Who cared what job a person had, what they did for a living? What really mattered, she thought as she stashed the feather in a trouser pocket, were the birds and the sun and the river and the days off school when you could just read a book or daydream and you didn't have to listen to some dreary teacher telling you things you had learned when you were three.

Later, much later, the touch of a feather would take her back to the day at the docks with Jim, and the delicate strength of the fine barbs able to hold a raptor aloft would remind her that nothing was ever quite as it appeared; reality always had an unsettling habit of turning out to be more like the knot in her stomach, a suppressed feeling, the half-familiar details of a story told once long ago and left buried in the drift of discarded memories.