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Opening Extract from...

The White Road

Written by Sarah Lotz

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THE
WHITE
ROAD

SARAH
LOTZ


HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

To: TCAKES@journeytothedarkside.com

From: simonpieman66@gmail.com

Hi T,

No easy way to say this, but I'm going back to Tibet. Yeah. Back to the mountain, though I swore I never would, remember? Leave for Heathrow in 5. How's that for casually dropping a bombshell? I've tried everything else, T, and going back is the only way. Got to the point where it's this or a padded cell.

If I don't make it home, there's a dropbox file you should check out. Sounds ominous, I know, like I've gone full B-movie: *If you're reading this then I'm already dead* . . . Password is 'fingersinyrheart06'. Anyway, read it. Or not. Up to you. Do whatever you want with it. Just needed to tell the truth. Put the record straight, you know?

Farewell and adieu, mate.

Aka

So long, and thanks for all the fish.

Si

PART ONE

Simon

December, 2006

I met the man who would save my life twice – and ultimately destroy it – on a potholed road in the arse-end of the Welsh countryside. He was sitting on a kitbag at the side of the lane, a trio of crushed cider cans at his feet. Morning mist still clung to the snow-dusted hills surrounding us, but all he was wearing on his top half was a Harley-Davidson T-shirt.

I pulled up next to him and wound down my window. ‘Ed?’

A curt nod.

‘Hi. I’m Simon.’

‘You’re late, lad. I said eight.’

‘Sorry about that, got a bit lost. All looks the same round here, doesn’t it?’ I gave him my best self-deprecating grin – it usually thawed the frostier punters at the coffee shop where I part-timed. It didn’t work on Ed.

He jabbed a finger at the rutted track snaking through a wooded area on the opposite side of the lane. ‘Pull into the trees over there. Don’t want the car to be seen from the road.’

‘Wilco.’

Wincing as branches scraped along the paintwork, I slid Thierry’s Ford Focus beneath the limbs of a broken tree. My breath smoked as I climbed out, stretched, and waited for Ed to join me. I was chilled to the bone (the car’s heater had packed up just outside Newport), and already cursing myself for setting this thing up.

He threw his bag next to the car and gave my hand a rough-palmed shake. Close up, he had the swollen nose and florid skin of a career alcoholic. Baby-fine hair wisped over his scalp. I put him at around sixty. *Do you really want to follow this grumpy old sod down a hole, Simon?*

‘Where’s your car, Ed?’

‘Don’t have one. Hitched here last night.’

‘All the way out here?’ Quite a feat: apart from a stoical sheep, he was the only living thing I’d seen in the last hour. He smelled like he might have slept rough; a cured-meat fug wafted off his clothes. ‘I could’ve given you a lift, picked you up somewhere.’

‘It’s no trouble.’

‘Well, I really appreciate this.’

A sniff. ‘So you want to go down Cwm Pot, then?’

‘Yeah.’

‘To film the caves.’

‘That’s right. Like I said in my emails, I’m interested in what happened down there in the eighties. Thought it might make a good documentary.’ Bullshit of course, but I wasn’t going to tell him the real reason I wanted to explore the caves until I had a clearer idea of how he might take it.

‘Caves are off-limits. Have been for twenty years.’

‘I know. That’s why I got hold of you.’

‘Dangerous, too.’

Fuck’s sake. ‘Yeah, Ed, I know.’

He smirked as if he knew something I didn’t. His irises were dark, the whites around them tinged with yellow – pickled-onion eyes. ‘You got my money?’

Tell this prick you’ve changed your mind and get the hell out of here. Good advice, sensible advice, but I ignored it. It had taken serious legwork to get to this point, and I wasn’t about to throw in the towel. After hearing about Cwm Pot and its grisly history, I’d spent days scouring caving forums looking for a guide, finally coming across Ed, the only caver who openly admitted sneaking into the caves. He was clearly a miserable old git with a drinking problem, but the other cavers on the forum deferred to him, so presumably he knew what he was doing. I gave him the three hundred quid we’d agreed on. He counted it, taking his time. ‘And an extra fifty for the equipment.’

Bastard. ‘That wasn’t part of the deal.’

‘It is now.’

‘Twenty.’

‘Twenty-five.’

He smirked again as I handed it over. Now I had to make this work. Half a month’s rent had disappeared into the pocket of his filthy jeans, as well as next week’s food and beer budget. ‘You brought gloves and boots like I told you?’

‘Yeah. Wellies and washing-up gloves, right?’ Not exactly the outdoor gear I was used to.

He dug in the bag and handed me a helmet, a head torch, a ratty belt with an old-fashioned karabiner attached, a yellow rubber exposure suit, a pair of kneepads and a blue fleece under-suit that resembled a giant Babygro. ‘Put that on first.’

He pulled his T-shirt over his head and I tried not to stare at the wormy scar bisecting his concave chest. That and the grey hair furring his limbs made him look older, vulnerable, less of a hard-man. ‘What you waiting for, lad?’

Not wanting to look prissy by retreating to the car to get changed, I used the exposure suit as a makeshift mat, stripped off and gingerly shucked the fleece suit over my legs. It held the same cured-meat pong as Ed.

‘What happened to you, lad?’ He was eyeing my own cluster of scar tissue, a network of raised white flesh criss-crossing my left shoulder.

‘Climbing accident. Eight years ago. Smashed up my ankle, femur and collarbone. Fractured my skull too.’ A stupid, avoidable accident. I’d been showing off in front of a group of hikers, free-climbing an easy first pitch at Cwm Silyn – the kind of training-wheels route I’d have cruised through when I was a kid. I’d got cocky, miscalculated what should have been a no-brainer grab, and then the ground was rushing up to meet me. ‘Two months in hospital.’ I rolled up the suit’s bottom cuff and pointed out the keloid bumps where the pins had fused my ankle together.

Another grunt. A sign of respect? Impossible to tell.

The yellow outer-suit was a size too small and nipped at my armpits and crotch, but it was surprisingly effective at keeping out the cold.

Time to get the guy onside – I was about to spend the day doing some seriously dangerous stuff with him, after all. ‘So, Ed. How long have you been—’

‘How old are you, lad?’

I blinked, wrong-footed. ‘Uh . . . twenty-eight.’

‘Think of yourself as a pretty boy, do you?’

‘What? Why would you say that? No.’

‘Married?’

‘No.’

‘Girlfriend?’

‘No. What’s all this got to do with—’

‘Not one of them pillow biters, are you?’

‘No!’ *Great – homophobic as well.*

‘You sure you can handle this?’

‘The caves? I think so.’

‘You think so?’

‘I know so.’

‘It’s not some tourist day out. Gets technical. Dangerous.’

‘I can handle myself.’

‘Caving experience?’

‘No, but like I said in my emails I’ve been climbing all my life.’

‘Don’t tell me, some namby-pamby weekend outings, am I right? A trip up Snowdon and a fiddle around Ben Nevis’s botty?’

‘I know what I’m doing. Among other things, I’ve done the Aiguilles and I was leading out on VS routes at sixteen.’ Pompous, and an exaggeration, but so what? He was pissing me off.

‘The Aiguilles, eh?’ A sneer. ‘Means nothing to me.’

My irritation flipped into anger. ‘Look, I’ve come a long way to do this. If you don’t want to guide me down there, just say so and give me my fucking money back.’

A cackle, a flash of tea-coloured teeth. ‘No need to lose your temper.’ He belched. ‘Get a move on. Want to be out of there before dark.’

‘Sure you don’t want to give me a hard time for a few more minutes?’

‘Nah. You’re all right, lad. Before I took you down there, I needed to know you had a backbone.’

‘Seriously? You were messing with me?’

He winked. ‘Get off your high horse. You’ll do.’ He took a hip flask out of the waterproof bag slung over his shoulder, knocked back a slug and handed it to me. I wasn’t a fan of hardtack, especially that early in the morning, but I surreptitiously wiped the spout and drank anyway, stupidly pleased that I’d passed the Ed test.

Back then, whenever I met someone new, I used to do this thing where I’d try and figure out their film or TV character equivalent – a dumb mental tic that started when I was in hospital recovering from the climbing accident. I knew immediately that my best mate Thierry was Ray, Dan Aykroyd’s character in *Ghostbusters* (American, pudgy, nerdy, endearing); Cosimo, my manager at Mission:Coffee, was Tony Soprano (mercurial, morbid, a mouth-breather with major mommy issues). Ed was easy. He was Quint, the unhinged, predatory shark hunter from *Jaws*. Same cruel smirk and scar fetish.

He rolled a cigarette while I fiddled with the helmet-cam’s waterproof case, attaching it to the helmet with clumsy fingers.

‘That going to work down there?’

‘Absolutely.’ Another lie. Thierry and I had bought the camera off a dodgy, debt-ridden motor-cross enthusiast who used to come into the coffee shop. Even in ideal conditions, its quality wasn’t great, I hadn’t tested it properly in limited light, and I wasn’t sure that the case, which I’d bought on the cheap and modified, would actually work. ‘How likely is it that we’ll get wet?’

‘Should be fine.’ A sly smile. ‘Unless you fall in.’

‘Fall in what?’

‘Just keep your wits about you, and mind you don’t get me on your film.’

‘You camera-shy, Ed?’

‘Just mind you don’t, lad.’

I tried the helmet on for size. The weight of the camera made it droop to one side, but it would have to do. I collected the

Snickers bar I'd bought for elevenses from the console, locked the car, and hid the key under the wheelbase. I thought about sending Thierry a text, something along the lines of <about to head into hell with Quint, farewell & adieu>, but it was unlikely I'd get a signal out here.

Ed made for a bramble-strangled stile, scrambled over it and headed up the sloping field beyond. I followed, my boots crunching on frosted grass and sheep shit. Despite being bow-legged and decades older than me, he set a cracking pace. By the time I caught up to him, I was puffing.

'How far is it?'

'Entrance is two miles or so.'

'That far? Couldn't we have driven closer?'

He gave me a sideways look. 'You're not in London now, lad. After we cross this section, we'll be trespassing. Keep an eye out for the farmer. He's come at me with a shotgun before.'

'That bad?'

'Doesn't want the hassle if people run into trouble down there. Happened more than a few times over the years.'

'How many times have you been down Cwm Pot? Since they closed the caves, I mean.'

'A fair few.'

'And you don't worry about the caves flooding?'

'I know what I'm doing. Know the signs.' He paused and looked up at the low concrete slab of the sky. 'Think it'll hold, but there might be run-off from the snow if it warms up later.'

Thanks to the booze and the fleece Babygro, my body was warm, but the crisp air made my lungs ache, and I trudged on in silence. We slurped through a shallow ford, and I trailed him across another couple of fields, through a barbed wire fence – a 'no trespassing' sign hanging from its tines – and down towards a rocky outcropping. A stream frothed and bubbled alongside it, edged with a fringe of startlingly green moss. After another short and slippery trek down a path, we came to a rock face with an opening about the size of an oven door. This was barred by a padlocked gate with a cracked and fading 'danger, no entry' sign

on it. He hung back while I got an establishing shot, then whipped out a Swiss Army knife and picked the padlock in seconds.

‘Where did you learn how to do that?’

‘Never you mind. In you get.’

I squeezed my body through the opening, and crab-walked into a sloping cavern. Ed relocked the padlock (‘Don’t want to advertise that we’re down here’), clicked on his headlamp, pushed past me, and disappeared into the mouth of a rough-hewn vertical tunnel at the far end. I peered into the tunnel’s throat, the beam of my head torch unable to penetrate much of the blackness. The ladder bolted to the wall was showing its age, and to reach the top rung, I’d have to swing my legs into the abyss and drop down more than a metre. Ed was already slithering down the mossy rungs like a ferret.

‘Stop playing with yourself, lad!’ his voice echoed up, punctuated by the thunk of feet on metal rungs.

I rolled onto my belly, and inched down until my toes hit the top rung, fingertips clinging to the edge of the hole until I had no choice but to commit. There was a bladder-weakening moment when I teetered, unbalanced, and then my legs took my weight and I was able to wriggle down until I could grip the top rung with my hands. *You used to be able to do this shit in your sleep, what happened to you?*

The fall happened. The bones had healed, but my confidence was still shattered. In hindsight, I suppose part of my motivation for heading down Cwm Pot was to see if I *could* still handle myself.

The washing-up gloves gripped the metal surprisingly well, as did the wellies I’d bought from a discount store the day before. The lower I went, the more comfortable I became. Then my left foot stepped down into nothing. I bent my head and directed the light between my legs, revealing the stony floor a couple of body lengths below me. There was no sign of Ed. Muscles straining as I took my weight on my arms, I let my legs dangle, counted to three and dropped, careful not to land awkwardly on my ankle. There had to be another route out: I doubted I’d be

able to reach the sheared-off end of the ladder even if I stood on Ed's shoulders. 'Ed? Now what?'

'There's a crack at the base.' His voice was reedy, as if it was coming from miles away. 'Get down on your arse, and slip through it feet first.'

True enough, there was a ragged fissure in the rock to my right. I wriggled through a short lumpy passage that dipped abruptly, and before I could arrest myself, plopped onto the floor at Ed's feet, landing on my tailbone.

'Ow. Thanks for the warning.'

Ed cackled. The sound didn't echo. Rather, the air seemed to swallow it.

I stood up and took stock. We were in a church-sized chamber, the ceiling arching above us in graceful waves, several walls adorned with the dripstone cascades of calcified rock in muted shades of red and bronze and gold. I'd imagined there would be a dank, dark odour of rot and stale water, maybe mould, but I couldn't smell anything at all. I breathed in, sniffing the air like a dog – still nothing. It was slightly warmer than outside. The sound of distant water whispered in the background, and every so often came the musical plink of globules dripping into shallow rock bowls. 'Impressive.'

'They were going to open it to the public back in the eighties, then those lads died down here. Put paid to that.' He led the way to a tunnel that branched off to the left. 'Time to go off-piste, lad.'

'How long will it take us to get through?'

'About three hours to the Rat Run if you don't mess about. Then another hour or so to get out. We'll exit about a mile from where we started.' Up until the mention of the Rat Run I'd successfully managed to keep claustrophobia at bay, but now it began to nip at me. 'Cwm Pot is known for its aptly named "Rat Run", five hundred metres of some of the tightest squeezes in the UK', was how the sadistic caving guide I'd consulted put it.

The tunnel's roof tapered down, forcing me to lurch along like a hunchback, and ended at a jumble of mid-sized boulders. A scramble over these led into a more impressive conduit, the

rock around us diminishing up into velvety blackness, the sloping floor peppered with scree. The burble and spatter of water was always with us. I double-checked the camera was secure, mindful that I only had an hour and a half of battery life. I'd have to be picky; especially if I got the chance to capture the footage I was really down here for.

The tunnel widened again, roomy enough for us to walk side by side. 'Where are you from, Ed?' Sometimes his voice had a Yorkshire burr; at other times it morphed into something less distinct.

'Lived all over.'

'And you usually do this alone?'

'Ay.'

'So what drew you to caving?'

'Been doing it off and on all my life, lad.' He turned and tapped the side of his nose. 'It's one of the places they can't get you.'

'Eh? Who can't get you?'

'Them, lad. *Them*. You know who I mean. Blair and Bush and those other fuckers. They can't track you down here, lad, with their CCTV and their satellites and their electromagnetic signals.'

Was he trying to psych me out again? I waited for the accompanying cackle. It didn't come. *Shit*. Now it wasn't just the thought of squeezing my bulk through a sodden rock fissure that made my bowels clench. Ed wasn't just a grumpy old codger with a drinking problem, but a bona fide nutter. But as we walked on, I caught him glancing slyly at me. I honestly couldn't tell if he was messing with me for some twisted reason of his own, or if he was genuinely deluded.

Go back, go back, make some excuse.

It wasn't just the practicalities that kept me moving forward – I'd never get back up that ladder – but my ego. Conspiracy nut or not, I couldn't bear the thought of Ed's scorn if I backed out now. Instead, I changed the subject. 'So they would have come this way? The lads who died down here in the eighties?' Lads. I was picking up his speech patterns.

‘They would. One route in, one route out. I was part of the rescue team.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh ay. Only cavers can rescue cavers. No good sending anyone else down. Don’t know what they’re doing, see?’

‘It must have been horrible.’

‘Oh it was *horrible* all right, lad,’ he spat, reminding me more than ever of Quint. ‘Couple of us almost drowned as well. Had to dam that stream up top, but it wouldn’t hold.’

We’d reached an enormous pile of boulders, the evidence of a long-ago cave-in, stacked to the top of the chamber. They looked impassable, implausible, like a movie set. ‘Boulder choke,’ Ed said, matter-of-factly. ‘Stay close. Going to be tight.’ He glanced at my belly. ‘You’re going to wish you’d given the pies a miss, lad.’

He scaled the rocks closest to us, then posted his body through a tiny V-shaped opening, twisting his torso mid-manoeuve. His light was far brighter than mine, and the second he slipped through the crack, shadows closed in on me. I hesitated, unsure that I would actually fit through it. It was all right for Ed. Ed was wiry. I had wide shoulders and a gut gestating a Guinness baby. Aping him, I corkscrewed my bulk through it, rock scraping my belly and back, trying not to think about the tons of imperious material above and around me. I detected a faint guff of sulphur as my suit rubbed against limestone – the first whiff of anything I’d had down here. Once through the opening, I had to contort myself through a lumpy U-bend, haul my body up a short vertical shaft, then scramble along a narrow funnel. Ed could do this on his hands and knees; I was forced to do an inelegant belly wiggle, pushing myself along with my elbows and toes, and all the while trying not to bash the camera on any outcroppings. Still, it wasn’t anywhere as difficult as he’d led me to believe. *Fuck you, Ed.*

The going for the next half-hour or so wasn’t challenging either: another hands-and-knees crawl, a squirm through a couple of eye-holes, and then I was birthed out into one of those roomy

chambers. Niggles about hiring a nut to guide me aside, I was beginning to enjoy myself. I decided it was best not to ask him about the bodies – not now that he'd revealed himself as a possible member of the tin-foil hat tribe. Instead, I'd concentrate on filming the Rat Run, and get Thierry to add creepy music and subtitles hinting at the caves' tragic history: *A Trip down Cwm Pot, The Caves of DEATH*, or something.

Ed was waiting for me at the base of a wide vertical face, which was riddled with ridgelines. Halfway up it, an elongated slender mouth bisected the stone, a rusty chain hanging in front of it.

'Took your time, lad. You ready for the next bit?' He pointed at the mouth with a gnarled finger. 'Got to climb up there, grab the chain and post yourself through that gap there.'

I could sense he was waiting for my reaction. From our vantage point the aperture looked too narrow to admit anything more substantial than a newspaper. 'Sure. No problem.'

He snorted, clearly seeing through my fake bravado. 'I'll go first, shall I?'

'Yep.' My mouth was dry.

He hared up the crease at the side of the wall, monkeyed across a ledge on the balls of his feet, and then, in one smooth movement, lunged, grabbed the chain and slotted himself feet first into the gap. He wriggled his way inside it, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

He'd made it look easy, and it was at first. The climb up was effortless, as if the cracks and ledges were purpose-made rather than random acts of nature, but when I reached for the chain and trusted my full weight to it, it jerked as if it was about to come loose from the bolt holding it in place. Heart in my throat, I pin-wheeled my legs upwards, catching the edge of the mouth with my toes, my head and torso hanging vertically down, brain filled with images of my head cracking open like a watermelon on the rock below. If the chain came loose from its mooring, that would be it. Moving my hands up the chain to eke my body into a better position, I managed to slot my feet inside, then my

legs. *Thank fuck.* There was just enough room for me to squirm my body further into the gloom, but I had to remove the helmet to prevent the camera scraping against the low ceiling. Using my bum and shoulder muscles, I wormed my way along, the stone above me a hair's breadth from my gut. The top opened out, and I slid the helmet back on. Now I was able to shift my body around, roll onto my front and crawl head-first along a passageway to where Ed was waiting for me, a savage smile on his face. 'Careful here, lad.'

'Oh *shit.*' The end of the tunnel dropped down to an inky abyss, a good three storeys below. The route down gave the impression of being as smooth as a sheet of glass. As my headlamp swept it, I fought a twist of vertigo, although I'd never had an issue with heights before.

Again he was watching me slyly. 'Shouldn't be a problem for a climber like you. Not one who's done the *Aiguilles.*' He didn't suggest a belay. In any case, we didn't have any rope.

And then he was off, dropping down, fearlessly taking a direct route, clinging to the rock like a spider. I watched him carefully, trying to memorise the handholds he chose.

'Come on then, Chris Bonington, let's see what you're made of.'

Dry-mouthed once more, I turned on the camera, my inner voice unhelpfully ad-libbing, *caught on camera, the last tragic moments of Simon Newman's life*, rolled onto my front and felt for the first toeholds, hoping to Christ that the limited light created an optical illusion, and made it appear more challenging than it actually was. *You can do this.* I couldn't allow myself to get gripped – frozen midway between moves. Traversing across was the best plan, and I paused while I scanned for the first grab. Within seconds, muscle memory kicked in, and taking my weight on my legs, I shone the light down and across for the next handhold. As with the previous face, they were fairly evenly placed. *Step down, traverse again. Take it slow, solve the problem.* Down and across, down and across. I took my time, fully absorbed in what I was doing, grateful that my ankle didn't appear to be

taking any strain. My thighs shook when I finally reached the base. And I was flushed with something else: euphoria. It was a basic climb, but I'd nailed it. The first real climb I'd done since the accident. I switched off the head-cam and turned to grin at Ed. 'That was actually—'

My spine exploded with pain as I was slammed into the crag behind me. Before my brain could fully comprehend what was happening, Ed had a hand at my throat, his fingers pinching my windpipe, his full weight pressing against me. 'Why are you really down here!' he spat in my face. 'Who sent you, who sent you!'

I'm not totally useless in a fight, but I fought the instinct to lash out at him, go for his eyes, head-butt him maybe. That wasn't an option. I had to calm him down; I was God knows how far underground and needed him to guide me out of here. The pressure on my windpipe increased – it hurt like a bastard – and I put my hands up in surrender. 'Please, Ed!' my voice squeaked out. 'Calm the fuck down. Please!'

'Why are you really here?' Spit flecked my skin, and I had the horrible feeling that he was about to lean in and bite me.

'I want to film the bodies for a website!'

The raw, agonising pressure on my windpipe eased. He stepped back, muttering to himself. I gagged and rubbed at my throat. 'Ed, I swear—'

'Quiet, lad.' He coughed, turned and spat. 'What website?'

'Me and my mate Thierry run it. It's called *Journey to the Dark Side*, and we've started doing this thing where we film creepy places and banter about them and put the clips up on the net and I heard about the caves and the disaster in the eighties, and a rumour that the bodies of the men who died back then are still here.' I was babbling like an idiot, but I didn't care. 'I wanted to film them. That's it. I swear that's the truth. It's not for a documentary and I'm sorry I lied about that, but I didn't realise . . .' *I didn't realise you were such a fucking nutter.* 'You believe me?'

We stood there, me breathing hard, him staring at me with

those pickled-onion eyes for at least a minute. I couldn't read his expression. It was muddy, unfocused.

I prepared myself for another onslaught. This time, I decided, I'd fight back; hit him with everything I had. If I fought him off, could I climb back up the traverse? Yeah, probably. But then what? I mentally tried to map the route we'd taken here. Christ, I just didn't know if I'd be able to retrace my steps, never mind get back up the ladder. I'd been following him blindly.

Then he let out one of his cackles.

'You believe me, Ed?'

'I believe you, lad. Had to be sure you weren't one of *them*.'

'I understand that, Ed.' *Oh Jesus.*

The flask emerged. We passed it back and forth, the cheap burn of the alcohol flushing away the irony after-tang of adrenalin, and making me feel vaguely sick. Again he was watching me with a wicked half-smile on his lips. I still couldn't decide if Ed's conspiracy bollocks and violent outburst were put on to freak me out. The thought wasn't a comfort: Ed was either a psychopath who was toying with me for sadistic reasons or a paranoid schizophrenic. The raw ache in my throat was easing, but my spine throbbed from being slammed against the rock.

'So. You want to see the bodies, you say.'

No. I want to get the fuck out of here and away from you as fast as possible. Too late for that, I was stuck with him. Might as well make the best out of a bad situation. 'Is it true? Are their remains still down here?'

He nodded, a trick of the light deepening the grooves in his face. 'Course they are. Think about it. You can't take a body out when it's this deep underground, lad. Not out of a network like this.'

I tried to imagine dragging a corpse through the snug spaces we'd been through, managing to make myself feel even sicker. 'And you know where they are?'

'Parents of the lads got the remains moved up to a chamber in the late eighties. They were going to seal it in with concrete, but then the landowner petitioned to have the whole system

closed for good, so they didn't see the point. You want to film them, you say?'

'Yeah.' Only now it seemed stupid. Obscene.

'You seen a dead body before, lad?'

'Yes.' *Don't go there.* But I couldn't stop the image of Dad flooding in. Lying there behind the grubby hospital curtain, his face muscles slack, an emptiness about him that had badly scared my ten-year-old self. Still scared me, if I'm honest.

'Me, I've seen plenty. Belfast. Bosnia. Been all over.'

'You were in the army, Ed?'

'Seventeen years, lad.'

Bosnia. When was that, early nineties? I should know. 'Why did you leave?' *Apart from the fact that you're certifiably insane or a psychopath. Or both.*

'Had to get rid of me, knew their plans, see? Knew what they were really up to.'

Conspiracy theory alert, keep him on track. 'Is it possible to see the bodies? Can we get to them?'

A crafty look. 'Ay. I can show you, lad. Shall we say an extra hundred quid?'

I didn't have an extra hundred quid, but I'd cross that bridge when we got out of here. 'Fine.'

The next section was easy. A short belly-wriggle, another boulder choke, and then the air was alive with the gush and chatter of water. We sidestepped down a scree slope to where a fast-moving stream gurgled into a tunnel. Ed crouched next to it. 'Water's higher than I'd like.' He sniffed. 'Should be okay, long as we don't fuck about. You getting cold feet, lad?'

'No.'

'You will soon.' The cackle turned into a liquid coughing fit that doubled him over. After another of his delightful hawk-and-spit combos, he stepped into the stream and sloshed ahead. I followed, the current coiling and pulsing against my calves. The floor dipped, I stumbled, and water spilled over the lip of my boots, soaking my socks, the sudden shock of cold making me gasp.