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Darkmans

Nicola Barker

Published by 4th Estate

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2007 by
Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 8JB
www.4thestate.co.uk

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-00-719362-2
ISBN-10 0-00-719362-9

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Typeset in Postscript Linotype Frutiger light,
Post Antiqua bold and Avant Garde extra light
by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

'These demanders for glimmer be for the most part women; for glimmer, in their language, is *fire*.'

Thomas Harman – *A Caveat for Common Cursitors* 1567

PART ONE

ONE

Kane dealt prescription drugs in Ashford; the Gateway to Europe. His main supplier was Anthony Shilling, a Waste Management Co-ordinator at the Frances Fairfax. Shilling was a quiet, Jamaican gentleman (caucasian – his family originally plantation owners) who came to England in the early seventies, settled in Dalston, London, and fell in love with a woman called Mercy, whose own family hailed from The Dominican Republic.

Mercy was British born. Anthony and Mercy moved to South Kent in 1976, where they settled and raised four daughters, one of whom was a professor of Political Sciences at Leeds University and had written a book called *Culture Clashes: Protest Songs and The Yardies (1977–1999).*

Kane was waiting for Anthony at the French Connection; a vulgar, graceless, licensed 'family restaurant' (a mammoth, prefabricated hut, inside of which a broad American roadhouse mentality rubbed up against all that was most intimate and accessible in Swiss chalet-style decor) on the fringes of the Orbital Park, one of Ashford's three largest – and most recent – greenfield industrial development sites.

The restaurant had been thoughtfully constructed to service the adjacent Travel Inn, which had, in turn, been thoughtfully constructed to service the through-traffic from the Channel Tunnel, much of which still roared carelessly past, just beyond the car park, the giant, plastic, fort-themed children's play area, the slight man-made bank and the formless, aimless tufts of old meadow and marshland with which the Bad Munstereifel Road (named after Ashford's delightful, medieval German twin) was neatly – if inconclusively – hemmed.

It was still too early for lunch on a Tuesday morning, and Kane (who hadn't been to bed yet) was slouched back in a heavily varnished pine chair, sucking ruminatively on a fresh Marlboro, and staring quizzically across the table at Beede, his father.

Beede also worked at the Frances Fairfax, where he ran the laundry with an almost mythical efficiency. Beede was his surname. His first

name – his Christian name – was actually Daniel. But people knew him as Beede and it suited him well because he was small, and hard, and unquestionably venerable (in precisely the manner of his legendarily bookish eighth-century precursor).

Beede knew all about Kane's business dealings, and didn't actually seem to give a damn that his only son was cheerfully participating in acts of both a legally and ethically questionable nature. Yet Anthony Shilling's involvement was – in Beede's opinion – an altogether different matter. He just couldn't understand it. It deeply perplexed him. He had liked and admired both Tony and Mercy for many years. He considered them 'rounded'; a respectable, comfortable, functional couple. Mercy had been a friend of Kane's mother, Heather (now deceased – she and Beede had separated when Kane was still a toddler). Beede struggled to comprehend Tony's motivation. He knew that it wasn't just a question of money. But that was all he knew, and he didn't dare (or care) to enquire any further.

'Beede.' Kane suddenly spoke. Beede glanced up from his second-hand Penguin orange-spine with a quick frown. Kane took a long drag on his cigarette.

'Well?'

Beede was irritable.

Kane exhaled at his leisure.

'What the fuck are you doing?'

Kane's tone was not aggressive, more lackadaisical, and leavened by its trademark tinge of gentle mockery.

Beede continued to scowl. 'What does it look like?'

He shook the book at Kane – by way of an answer – then returned to it, huffily.

Kane wasn't in the slightest bit dismayed by the sharpness of Beede's response.

'But why the fuck,' he said, 'are you doing it *here*?'

Beede didn't even look up this time, just indicated, boredly, towards his coffee cup. 'Should I draw you a picture?'

Kane smiled.

He and Beede were not close. And they were not similar, either. They were different in almost every conceivable way. Beede was lithe, dark, strong-jawed, slate-haired and heavily bespectacled. He seemed like the kind of man who could deal with almost any kind of physical or intellectual challenge –

It's the radiator. If you want to try and limp back home with it, I'll need a tub of margarine, a litre of water and a packet of Stimorol; but I won't make you any promises . . .

Ned Kelly's last ever words? Spoken as he stood on the scaffold: 'Such is life.'

You're saying you've never used a traditional loom before? Well it's pretty straightforward . . .

Yes, I do believe the earwig is the only insect which actually suckles its young.

No. Nietzsche didn't hate humanity. That's far too simplistic. What Nietzsche actually said was, 'Man is something which must be overcome.'

To all intents and purposes Daniel Beede was a model citizen. So much so, in fact, that in 1983 he'd been awarded the Freedom of the Borough as a direct consequence of his tireless work in charitable and community projects during the previous two decades.

He was Ashford born and bred; a true denizen of a town which had always – but especially in recent years – been a landmark in social and physical re-invention. Ashford was a through-town, an ancient turnpike (to Maidstone, to Hythe, to Faversham, to Romney, to Canterbury), a geographical plughole; a place of passing and fording (Ash-*ford*, formerly *Essetesford*, the Eshe being a tributary of the River Stour).

Yet in recent years Beede had been in the unenviable position of finding his own home increasingly unrecognisable to him (*Change*; My *God*! He woke up, deep in the night, and could no longer locate himself. Even the blankets felt different – the quality of light through his window – the *air*). Worse still, Beede currently considered himself to be one of the few individuals in this now flourishing 'Borough of Opportunity' (current population c.102,000) to have been washed up and spat out by the recent boom.

Prior to his time (why not call it a Life Sentence?) in the hospital laundry, Beede had worked – initially at ground level (exploiting his naval training), then later, in a much loftier capacity – for Sealink (the ferry people), and had subsequently become a significant figure at

Mid-Kent Water plc; suppliers of over 36 million gallons of H2O, daily, to an area of almost 800 square miles.

If you wanted to get specific about it (and Beede always got specific) his life and his career had been irreparably blighted by the arrival of the Channel Tunnel; more specifically, by the eleventh-hour re-routing of the new Folkestone Terminal's access road from the north to the south of the tiny, nondescript Kentish village of Newington (where Beede's maternal grandmother had once lived) in 1986.

Rather surprisingly, the Chunnel hadn't initially been Beede's political *bête noire*. He'd always been studiously phlegmatic about its imminence. The prospect of its arrival had informed (and seasoned) his own childhood in much the same way that it had informed both his parents' and his grandparents' before them (as early as the brief Peace of Amiens, Napoleon was approached by Albert Mathieu Favier – a mining engineer from Northern France – who planned to dig out two paved and vaulted passages between Folkestone and Cap Gris-Nez; the first, a road tunnel, lit by oil lamps and ventilated by iron chimneys, the second, to run underneath it, for drainage. This was way back in 1802. The subsequent story of the tunnel had been a long and emotionally exhausting tale spanning two centuries and several generations; an epic narrative with countless dead-ends, low-points, disasters and casualties. Daniel Beede – and he was more than happy to admit as much – was merely one of these).

Politically, *ideologically*, Beede had generally been of a moderate bent, but at heart he was still basically progressive. And he'd always believed in the philosophy of 'a little and often', which – by and large – had worked well for him.

Yes, of course – on the environmental brief – he'd been passingly concerned about the loss of the rare Spider Orchid (the site of the proposed Folkestone Terminal was one of the few places it flourished, nationally), and not forgetting the currently endangered great crested newt, which Beede remembered catching as a boy in local cuts and streams with his simple but robust combination of a small mesh net and marmalade-jar.

And yes, he was well aware – more, perhaps, than anybody – of what the true (and potentially devastating) implications of a Channel link would be on the Kentish shipping industry (a loss of around 20,000 jobs was, at that time, the popular estimate).

And yes, *yes,* he had even harboured serious fears – and quite

correctly, as it later transpired – that many of the employment opportunities on the project would pass over local people (at that point Ashford had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country) to benefit non-indigens, outside investors and foreign businesses.

It went without saying that the Chunnel (now a source of such unalloyed national complacency and pride) had caused huge headaches – and terrible heartache – in East Kent, but Beede's greatest betrayal had been on a much smaller, more informal, more *abstract* level.

Beede's maternal grandmother's home had been a neat, quaint, unpretentious little cottage (pottery sink, tile floors, outside lavvy) in the middle of a symmetrical facade of five known as Church Cottages. They were located at the conjunction of the old School Road and Newington's main, central thoroughfare The Street (no shop, no pub, twenty-five houses, at a push).

Much as their name implies, Church Cottages enjoyed a close physical proximity with Newington's twelfth-century church and its similarly ancient – and much-feted – graveyard Yew.

Beede's paternal grandparents (to whom he was slightly less close) also lived locally – several hundred yards north up the aforementioned Street – in the neighbouring village of Peene. Just so long as any inhabitant of either of these two tiny Kentish villages could remember, they had considered themselves a single community.

When the developer's plans for the new Folkestone Terminal were initially proposed, however, it quickly became apparent that all this was soon about to change. Several farms and properties (not least, the many charming, if ramshackle homes in the idiosyncratic Kentish hamlet of Danton Pinch) were to be sacrificed to the terminal approach and concourse, not to mention over 500 acres of prime farmland and woodland, as well as all remaining evidence of the old Elham Valley Railway (built in 1884, disused since 1947). But worse still, the access road from the terminal to the M20 was due to cut a wide path straight between Newington and Peene, thereby cruelly separating them, forever.

Beede's maternal grandmother and paternal grandparents were now long gone. Beede's mother had died of breast cancer in 1982. His part-senile father now lived with Beede's older brother on the south coast, just outside Hastings.

Beede's parents had moved to the heart of Ashford (14 miles away) two years before he was even conceived, but Beede maintained a

lively interest in their old stamping ground; still visited it regularly, had many contacts among the local Rotary and Cricket Clubs (the cricket grounds were yet another Chunnel casualty), friends and relatives in both of the affected villages, and a strong sense – however fallacious – that the union of these two places (like the union of his two parents) was a critical – almost a *physical* – part of his own identity.

They could not be divided.

It was early in the spring of 1984 when he first became aware of Eurotunnel's plans. Beede was a well-seasoned campaigner and local prime mover. His involvement was significant. His opinions mattered. And he was by no means the only dynamic party with a keen interest in this affair. There were countless others who felt equally strongly, not least (it soon transpired) Shepway's District Council. On closer inspection of the proposed scheme, the Council had become alarmed by the idea that this divisive 'Northern Access Route' might actively discourage disembarking Chunnel traffic from travelling to Dover, Folkestone or Hythe (Shepway's business heartland) by feeding it straight on to the M20 (and subsequently straight on to London). The ramifications of this decision were perceived as being potentially catastrophic for local businesses and the tourist trade.

A complaint was duly lodged. The relevant government committee (where the buck ultimately stopped) weighed up the various options on offer and then quietly turned a blind eye to them. But the fight was by no means over. In response, the Council, Beede, and many residents of Newington and Peene got together and threatened a concerted policy of non-cooperation with Eurotunnel if a newly posited scheme known as 'The Shepway Alternative' (a scheme still very much in its infancy) wasn't to be considered as a serious contender.

In the face of such widespread opposition the committee reassessed the facts and – in a glorious blaze of publicity – backed down. The decision was overturned, and the new Southern Access Route became a reality.

This small but hard-won victory might've been an end to the Newington story. But it wasn't. Because now (it suddenly transpired) there were to be *other* casualties, directly as a consequence of this hard-won Alternative. And they would be rather more severe and destructive than had been initially apprehended.

To keep their villages unified, Newington and Peene had sacrificed a clutch of beautiful, ancient properties (hitherto unaffected by the

terminal scheme) which stood directly in the path of the newly proposed Southern Link with the A20 and the terminal. One of these was the grand Victorian vicarage, known as The Grange, with its adjacent Coach House (now an independent dwelling). Another, the magnificent, mid-sixteenth-century farmhouse known as Stone Farm. Yet another, the historic water mill (now non-functioning, but recently renovated and lovingly inhabited, with its own stable block) known as Mill House.

Beede wasn't naive. He knew only too well how the end of one drama could sometimes feed directly into the start of another. And so it was with the advent of what soon became known as 'The Newington Hit List'.

Oh the uproar! The sense of local betrayal! The media posturing and ranting! The archaeological *chao*s engendered by this eleventh-hour re-routing! And Beede (who hadn't, quite frankly, really considered all of these lesser implications – Mid-Kent Water plc didn't run itself, after all) found himself involved (didn't he owe the condemned properties that much, at least?) in a crazy miasma of high-level negotiations, conservation plans, archaeological investigations and restoration schemes, in a last-ditch attempt to rectify the environmental devastation which (let's face it) he himself had partially engendered.

Eurotunnel had promised to dismantle and re-erect any property (or part of a property) that was considered to be of real historical significance. The Old Grange and its Coach House were not 'historical' enough for inclusion in this scheme and were duly bulldozered. Thankfully some of the other properties did meet Eurotunnel's high specifications. Beede's particular involvement was with Mill House, which – it soon transpired – had been mentioned in the Domesday Book and had a precious, eighteenth-century timber frame.

The time for talking was over. Beede put his money where his mouth was. He shut up and pulled on his overalls. And it was hard graft: dirty, heavy, time-consuming work (every tile numbered and categorised, every brick, every beam), but this didn't weaken Beede's resolve (Beede's resolve was legendary. He gave definition to the phrase 'a stickler').

Beede was committed. And he was not a quitter. Early mornings, evenings, weekends, he toiled tirelessly alongside a group of other volunteers (many of them from Canterbury's Archaeological Trust) slowly, painstakingly, stripping away the mill's modern exterior, and

(like a deathly coven of master pathologists), uncovering its ancient skeleton below.

It wasn't all plain sailing. At some point (and who could remember when, exactly?) it became distressingly apparent that recent 'improvements' to the newer parts of Mill House had seriously endangered the older structure's integrity –

Now hang on –
Just . . . just back up a second –
What are you saying here, exactly?

The worst-case scenario? That the old mill might never be able to function independently in its eighteenth-century guise; like a conjoined twin, it might only really be able to exist as a small part of its former whole.

But the life support on the newer part had already been switched off (they'd turned it off themselves, hadn't they? And with such care, such tenderness), so gradually – as the weeks passed, the months – the team found themselves in the unenviable position of standing helplessly by and watching – with a mounting sense of desolation – as the older part's heartbeat grew steadily weaker and weaker. Until one day, finally, it just stopped.

They had all worked so hard, and with such pride and enthusiasm. But for what? An exhausted Beede staggered back from the dirt and the rubble (a little later than the others, perhaps; his legendary resolve still inappropriately firm), shaking his head, barely comprehending, wiping a red-dust-engrained hand across a moist, over-exerted face. Marking himself. But there was no point in his war-painting. He was alone. The fight was over. It was lost.

And the worst part? He now knew the internal mechanisms of that old mill as well as he knew the undulations of his own ribcage. He had crushed his face into its dirty crevices. He had filled his nails with its sawdust. He had pushed his ear up against the past and had sensed the ancient breath held within it. He had gripped the liver of history and had felt it squelching in his hand –

Expanding –
Struggling –

So what now? What now? What to tell the others? How to make sense of it all? How to rationalise? Worse still, how to face the hordes of encroaching construction workers in their bright yellow TML uniforms, with their big schemes and tons of concrete, with their impatient cranes and their diggers?

Beede had given plenty in his forty-odd years. But now (he pinched himself. *Shit*. He felt *nothing*) he had given too much. He had found his limit. He had reached it and he had over-stepped it. He was engulfed by disappointment. Slam-dunked by it. He could hardly *breathe,* he felt it so strongly. His whole body ached with the pain of it. He was so stressed – felt so *invested* in his thwarted physicality – that he actually thought he might be developing some kind of fatal disease. Pieces of him stopped functioning. He was *broken*.

And then, just when things seemed like they couldn't get any worse –

Oh God!
The day the bulldozers came . . .

(He'd skipped work. They'd tried to keep him off-site. There was an ugly scuffle. But he saw it! He stood and watched – three men struggling to restrain him – he stood and he watched – jaw slack, mouth wide, *gasping* – as History was unceremoniously gutted and then steam-rollered. He saw History *die* –

NO!
You're killing History!
STOP!)

– just when things seemed like they were hitting rock bottom ('You need a holiday. A good rest. You're absolutely exhausted – *dangerously* exhausted; mentally, physically . . .') things took one further, inexorable, downward spiral.

The salvageable parts of the mill had been taken into storage by Eurotunnel. One of the most valuable parts being its ancient Kent Peg Tiles –

Ah yes
Those beautiful tiles . . .

Then one day they simply disappeared.

They had been preserved. They had been maintained. They had been entrusted. They had been *lost.*

BUT WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY?
WHERE DID THEY GO?
WHERE?
WHERE?!

It had all been in vain. And nobody really cared (it later transpired, or if they did, they stopped caring, eventually – they *had* to, to survive it), except for Beede – who hadn't really cared that much in the first place – but who had done something bold, something decisive, something out of the ordinary; *Beede* – who had committed himself, had become embroiled, then engrossed, then utterly preoccupied, then thoroughly—

Irredeemably

– fucked up and casually (like the past itself) discarded.

And no, in the great scheme of things, it didn't amount to very much. Just some old beams, some rotten masonry, some traditional tiles. But Beede suddenly found that he'd lost not only those tiles, but his own rudimentary supports. His *faith*. The roof of Beede's confidence had been lifted and had blown clean away. His optimism. He had lost it. It just *went*.

And nothing – *nothing* – had felt the same, afterwards. Nothing had felt comfortable. Nothing fitted. A full fifteen years had passed, and yet – and at complete variance with the cliché – for Beede time had been anything but a great healer.

Progress, *modernity* (all now dirty words in Beede's vocabulary) had kicked him squarely in the balls. I mean he hadn't asked for much, had he? He'd sacrificed the Spider Orchid, hadn't he? A familiar geography? He'd only wanted, out of *respect*, to salvage . . . to salvage . . .

What?

A semblance of what had been? Or was it just a question of . . . was it just a matter of . . . of *form*? Something as silly and apparently insignificant as . . . as *good manners*?

There had been one too many compromises. He knew that much for certain. The buck had needed to stop and it never had. It'd never stopped. So Beede had put on his own brakes and he had stopped. The compromise culture became his anathema. He had shed his former skin (*Mr Moderate, Mr Handy, Mr Reasonable*) and had blossomed into an absolutist. But on his own terms. And in the daintiest of ways. And very quietly –

Shhh!

Oh no, no, *no*, the war wasn't over –

Shhh!

Beede was still fighting (mainly in whispers), it was just that – by and large – they were battles that nobody else knew about. Only Beede. Only he knew. But it was a hard campaign; a fierce, long, difficult campaign. And as with all major military strategies, there were gains and there were losses.

Beede was now sixty-one years of age, and he was his own walking wounded. He was a shadow of his former self. His past idealism had deserted him. And somehow – along the way – he had lost interest in almost everything (in work, in family), but he had maintained an interest in one thing: he had maintained an interest in that old mill.

He had become a detective. A bloodhound. He had sniffed out clues. He had discovered things; stories, alibis, weaknesses; inconsistencies. He had weighed up the facts and drawn his conclusions. But he had bided his time (time was the one thing he had plenty of – no *rush*; that was the modern disease – no *need* to rush).

Then finally (at last) he had apportioned blame. With no apparent emotion, he had put names to faces (hunting, finding, assessing, gauging). And like Death he had lifted his scythe, and had kept it lifted; waiting for his own judgement to fall; holding his breath – like an ancient yogi or a Pacific pearl diver; like the still before the storm, like a suspended wave: freeze-framed, *poised.* He held and he held. He even (and this was the wonderful, the crazy, the hideous part) found a terrible *equilibrium* in holding.

Beede was the vengeful tsunami of history.
But even the venerable could not hold indefinitely.

'You know what?' Kane suddenly spoke, as if waking from a dream. 'I'd *like* that.'

Beede didn't stir from his book.

'I'd actually *like* it if you drew me a picture. Do you have a pencil?'

Kane was twenty-six years old and magnificently quiescent. He was a floater; as buoyant and slippery as a dinghy set adrift on a choppy sea. He was loose and unapologetically light-weight (being light-weight was the only thing he ever really took seriously). He was so light-weight, in fact, that sometimes (when the wind gusted his way) he might fly into total indolence and do nothing for three whole days but read sci-fi, devour fried onion rings and drink tequilla in front of a muted-out backdrop of MTV.

Kane knew what he liked (knowing what you liked was, he felt, one of the most important characteristics of a modern life well lived). He knew what he wanted and, better yet, what he needed. He was easy as a greased nipple (and pretty much as moral). He was tall (6' 3", on a good day), a mousy blond, rubber-faced, blue-eyed, with a full, cruel mouth. Almost handsome. He dressed without any particular kind of distinction. Slightly scruffy. Tending towards plumpness, but still too young for the fat to have taken any kind of permanent hold on him. He had a slight American accent. As a kid he'd lived for seven years with his mother in the Arizona desert and had opted to keep the vocal cadences of that region as a souvenir.

'Come to think of it, I believe I may actually . . .'

Kane busily inspected his own trouser pockets, then swore under his breath, sat up and glanced around him. A waitress was carrying a tray of clean glasses from somewhere to somewhere else.

'Excuse me . . .' Kane waved at her, 'would you happen to have a pencil on you?'

The waitress walked over. She was young and pretty with a mass

of short, unruly blonde hair pinned back from her neat forehead by a series of precarious-looking, brightly coloured kirby grips.
'I might have one in my . . . *uh* . . .'

She slid the tray of glasses on to the table. Kane helpfully rearranged his large Pepsi and his cherry danish (currently untouched) to make room for it. Maude (the strangely old-fashioned name was emblazoned on her badge) smiled her thanks and slid her hand into the pocket of her apron. She removed a tiny pencil stub.

'It's very small,' she said.
Kane took the pencil and inspected it. It was minuscule.
'It's an HB,' he said, carefully reading its chewed tip, then glancing over at Beede. 'Is an HB okay? Is it soft enough?'
Beede did not look up.

Kane turned back to the waitress, who was just preparing to grapple with the tray of glasses again.
'Before you pick that up, Maude,' Kane said, balancing his cigarette on the edge of his plate, 'you wouldn't happen to have a piece of *paper* somewhere, would you?'
'Uh . . .'

The waitress pushed her hand back into her apron and removed her notepad. She bit her lip. 'I have a pad but I'm not really . . .'

Kane put out his hand and took the pad from her. He flipped though it.
'The paper's kind of thin,' he said. 'What I'm actually looking for is some sort of . . .'
He mused for a moment. 'Like an *artist's* pad. Like a *Daler* pad. I don't know if you've heard of that brand name before? It's like an *art* brand . . .'

The waitress shook her head. A kirby grip flew off. She quickly bent down and grabbed it.
'Oh. Well that's a shame . . .'
The waitress straightened up again, clutching the grip.

Kane grinned at her. It was an appealing grin. Her cheeks reddened.
'Here . . .' Kane said, 'let me . . .'

He leaned forward, removed the kirby grip from her grasp, popped it expertly open, beckoned her to lean down towards him, then applied it, carefully, to a loose section of her fringe.
'There . . .'
He drew back and casually appraised his handiwork. 'Good as new.'

'Thanks.' She slowly straightened up again. She looked befuddled. Kane took a quick drag on his cigarette. The waitress – observing this breach – laced her fingers together and frowned slightly (as if sternly reacquainting her girlish self with all the basic rules of restaurant etiquette). '*Um* . . . I'm afraid you're not really . . .' she muttered, peeking nervously over her shoulder.

'What?'

Kane gazed at her. His blue eyes held hers, boldly. '*What*?'

She winced. 'Smoke . . . you're not really meant to . . . not in the restaurant.'

'Oh . . . *yeah*,' Kane nodded emphatically, 'I know that.'

She nodded herself, in automatic response, then grew uncertain again. He passed her the pad. She took it and slid it into her apron. 'Can I hold on to this pencil?' Kane asked, suspending it, in its entirety, between his first finger and his thumb. 'As a keepsake?'

The waitress shot an anxious, side-long glance towards Beede (still reading). 'Of course,' she said.

She grabbed her tray again.

'Thank you,' Kane murmured, 'that's very generous. You've been really . . .' he paused, weighing her up, appreciatively '. . . *sweet*.'

The waitress – plainly disconcerted by Kane's intense scrutiny – took a rapid step away from him, managing, in the process, to incline her tray slightly. The glasses slid around a little. She paused, with a gasp, and clumsily readjusted her grip.

'Bye then,' Kane said (not even a suggestion of laughter in his voice).

She glanced up, thoroughly flustered. '*Yes*,' she said, 'of course. Thank you. *Bye* . . .'

Then she ducked her head down, grimacing, and fled.

Beede continued reading. It was as if the entire episode with the waitress had completely eluded him.

Kane gently placed the pencil next to Beede's coffee cup, then picked up his danish and took a large bite of it. He winced as his tooth hit down hard on a stray cherry stone.

'Shit.'

He spat the offending mouthful into a napkin – silently denouncing all foodstuffs of a natural origin – then carefully explored the afflicted tooth with his tongue. While he did so, he gazed idly over towards the large picture window to his right, and out into the half-empty car park beyond.

'Expecting someone?' Beede asked, quick as a shot.

Kane took a second (rather more cautious) bite of the danish. 'Yup,' he said, unabashedly, 'Anthony Shilling.'

'What?!'

Beede glanced up as he processed this name, a series of conflicting expressions hurtling across his face.

'I thought you knew,' Kane said (eyebrows slightly raised), still chewing.

'How would I know?' Beede snapped, slapping down his book.

'Because you're *here,*' Kane said, 'and why else would you be? It's miles away from anywhere you'd ever normally go, and it's a shithole.'

'I come here often,' Beede countered. 'I *like* it. It's convenient for work.'

'That's just a silly lie,' Kane sighed, evincing zero tolerance for Beede's dissembling.

'Strange as this may seem,' Beede hissed, 'I'm actually in no particular hurry to get caught up in some sordid little situation between you and one of my senior *work* colleagues . . .'

'Well that's a shame,' Kane said, casually picking up his cigarette again, 'because that's exactly what's about to happen.'

Beede leaned down and grabbed a hold of his small, khaki workbag – as though intending to make a dash for it – but then he didn't actually move. Something (in turn) held him.

Kane frowned. 'Beede, why the fuck are you *here*?' he asked again, now almost sympathetically.

'They make a good coffee,' Beede lied, dropping the bag again.

'Fuck *off*. The coffee is heinous,' Kane said. 'And just *look* at you,' he added, 'you're *crapping* yourself. You hate this place. The piped music is making you nauseous. Your knee is jogging up and down under the table so hard you're knocking all the bubbles out of my Pepsi.'

Beede's knee instantly stopped its jogging.

Kane took a quick swig of the imperilled beverage (it was still surprisingly fizzy), and as he placed the glass back down again, it suddenly dawned on him – the way all new things dawned on him: slowly, and with a tiny, mischievous jolt – how unbelievably guarded his father seemed –

Beede?

Hiding something?